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Oral history interview with George S. Abrams, 2018 Jan. 25- Oct. 25

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with George Abrams on January 25 and 26, and October 25, 2018. The interview took place at the offices of the Archives of American Art in New York, NY, and was conducted by Louisa Wood Ruby for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and The Frick Collection.

George Abrams and Louisa Wood Ruby have reviewed this transcript. Their edits and emendations are marked with their initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. Please note the timecodes corresponding to the audio recording in this transcript are not exact.

Interview

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, here we go. This is Louisa Wood Ruby interviewing George Abrams at the Archives of American Art office in New York, New York on January 25th, 2018, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and the Center for the History of Collecting in America at the Frick Art Reference Library of The Frick Collection. Card number one. Okay, so, welcome.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Hi.

[They laugh.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I wanted to start with your background in collecting. So, before your first drawing in 1960—all the way back to the very beginning, when you were born. When were you—where were you born, and were you exposed to art at any kind of a way as a kid with your parents, going to museums?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was born in Boston.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Boston is a cultural city. My mother's father, I found out sometime after I was in my teens, was an art dealer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, wow, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There were almost no art dealers around in those days. I guess he must have done framing too, but he was very interested in art. I didn't know him—he died when I was three or four. My mother was a very good draftswoman. She could draw, and she tried to encourage me and my older sister Ruth to be interested in art. We went to the Boston Museum on Saturdays, and I attended some classes where they were teaching drawing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Unfortunately, I was not very good at it, and I knew it fairly quickly.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, I didn't spend enough time working on it. [00:02:00] And I know that I really should not consider myself a draftsman. Now, some collectors are, and you get people like Bill Middendorf—Ambassador Middendorf, who does continuous sketchbooks, sketches all the people he knows, and art historians.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, you have me, and I wouldn't sketch anything. I could hardly do a—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY A tree? [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: A puzzle, or— [Laughs.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, did she have—did she practice drawing? Was she an active artist, or was she just—

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, she wasn't active. She had activities, which I guess didn't give her a lot of time to do that, but we would go to music events and art events when we were little. Not as a regular thing, but.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Enough so that you were exposed—

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I had an uncle who was a serious collector.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, you did?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. Her brother collected Americana, and American silver.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he was quite a major collector, particularly in the silver field. He had very good silver—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did he live in Boston, too?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, he lived in Boston. He was involved with the Boston Museum.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And his collection was well known. He gave a number of wonderful silver pieces to the State Department, Myer Myers pieces, and he found—interesting story: he found the Liberty Bowl in New York City.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, wow.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it had turned up at one of the dealers who he was friendly with. And he got all excited about it, and he understood that the Metropolitan Museum was interested in it. [00:04:09] But he put a deposit on it with his own money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Then went back to the Boston Museum and they started a campaign. And they raised the money to buy it, and he led the campaign with another—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: What was his name?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Mark Bortman, B-O-R-T-M-A-N.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they raised money from school kids and everybody, and the Liberty Bowl was a treasure that was acquired. And I remember—is it really, oh boy, I think in the '40s? They had a ceremony at the State House where the museum accepted the Liberty Bowl from the public.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The Boston—so, the Boston, big State House there?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: In the Commons.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I was there, and it was exciting.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, really. It was in your blood.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He did some other things, too.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He gave—he found John Adams' silver, and coffee and tea sets. And he ultimately gave them to the White House—Lyndon Johnson. And they're in the White House now in the Adams Room.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, that's so exciting. Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, but I mean, we were—I was not involved in his collecting, particularly—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —but I was aware of it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You saw it. It was an example.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we talked about it. I would visit with him. And I admired it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wow. So, did you—when you were little, did you, you know, like to collect things? Did you start collecting stamps, or prints, or baseball cards, or something like that?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. You know, I don't know whether a collecting virus exists or not.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I know collectors who only get interested in collecting things when they're retiring—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. [00:06:02]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and have time. But I was always interested in collecting things. You know, the usual things—marbles and baseball cards—but I collected other things, too. I remember I collected matchbook covers from different parts of the world.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we didn't have a lot of spare money, so I didn't go into, you know, serious collecting. I might have—I was interested in my uncle's historical document collection—documents by John Hancock, and George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. And they were plentiful.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: He was quite the historian, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He gave a—he and his wife gave an Americana collection—in Boston University now. But they were plentiful. And they weren't expensive. You could buy a wonderful George Washington letter for $100 or less.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, really.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And, I remember there was a shop, Goodspeed's. And Goodspeed's had these wonderful old documents and everything. And I used to go by there and look at things.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Sure. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But yes, I was interested in historical documents and collecting. Not so much in collecting art books. My father was a collector, too.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: My father, well, he went to Harvard and graduated. He started at 16, he graduated at 19, in three years. He was supposed to go to law school, but he decided to get an MA in history for a year, and do—which he did. And he did some interesting work. And he collected books and documents. [00:08:02] I remember fore-edge books, and other things. And we would occasionally—he would take me to auctions in and around Boston. Cohasset.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: That was an area that he had grown up as a boy, somewhat near in Cohasset, where they would have auctions periodically. And I remember we bought a coin collection—a lot of wonderful coins. As a collection, they weren't—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, so you actually, like, were experienced in, you know, sitting in an auction room, and how the bidding kind of goes, and stuff from that early time.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I went to auctions as a young kid.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: They were different than some of the high-powered ones, but they're—the same sort of dynamics went on.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: But I mean, it's a certain kind of dynamic, right? The

auction house— [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Absolutely. And you get people who don't want anyone to see them bidding, and other

people make a show of it—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There are all sorts of characters. My parents liked the show.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: They did? They enjoyed that kind of—

GEORGE ABRAMS: But they were careful in what they bought, and they bought, really, some very good things. I remember we bought a whole stamp collection on Jerusalem Road in Cohasset. That's south of Boston. And turned out there were wonderful stamps in it. Nobody cared much about it. They had them all in a box or something—a cardboard box. But we studied them, learned a lot.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, did your sister go, too? Was it sort of a family outing, like, this weekend? [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Not so much. I had two sisters; the younger one was quite a bit younger. My oldest sister was not doing it as much as I was, and didn't have the same drive. But she was—I mean, she was interested in scholarly things.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: She became a well-known judge. [00:10:00] The first woman ever to go on the Supreme Court in Massachusetts. And she remembered every case she ever read. I couldn't remember that sort of thing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, wow, really? Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. I had another uncle who collected stamps.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Not on my mother's side, on my father's side. But he had very good stamps, and it was a good collection. He was serious about it. And I remember as a boy going over to his house, and he sat me down and took out a book and said, "Look, we're going to form a little collection for you." And he took stamps that represented historical events, and presidents, and famous Americans. *Famous Americans* series. And we did that for Saturdays, every, off and on. And I finally had a book with 300 or 400 stamps in it. And—more in history, so I had George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and all these different people. And I still have that book.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You do? I was going to ask you what did you do with it.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I still have it. It's got his writing on it, and who it was, and sometimes what the event was, and why it was important.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, wow. So, would you say he sort of really got you started, in a way? That uncle, your father's brother?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No.

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Long before then, I had baseball cards and other things. I don't think I was obsessed with it, it was just part of what we did as kids. And there were other kids doing it, too.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, yes, baseball cards.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And baseball cards—we all had them, and we would trade them and then we would flip them against stairs to see if we could win somebody's good cards. [00:12:03]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we did the same with marbles and things like that. But I didn't feel driven by it at all.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No? You didn't, not back then. And even this book that your uncle started, you didn't feel like—it was just sort of something you were doing—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was learning a lot of history.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, and you liked that? Or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. Okay. So, that was a sort of way in to history.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, it was something that I liked. I liked American history—I still do. I have a collection of American historical documents.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, you do, also? Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. I have Revolutionary War documents, some John Hancock material, and—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did any of that come from either of your uncles? Or your father?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Some of it from my father. Not from—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The uncle.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —my uncle. Actually, I remember once I—somewhere or another, I bought a group of paper money issued by states in the United States, way back. No longer currency.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I had all sorts of shilling bills and other things—paper money. And they print sometimes a picture of somebody on it. And I was excited about it, because I thought it was interesting and good, and I brought them over to my uncle and he got very excited. And I said to him something about, "Well—"

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wait, which uncle was this? Was this Mark, or your—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Mark.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I said, "Well, if you want some, there's about 50 of them there. Why don't you take some?" And the next thing I knew, there were 40 on his side and 10 on my side. [00:14:02]

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was a much more serious collector than I was.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: He was a little older, too. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. Well, and in that group were two paper currencies where the engraving on it had been done by Paul Revere.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, so he picked that up.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I didn't know that, he knew it. [Laughs.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, I was going to say, as a silver collector. [Laughs.] Oh, but he was really excited, probably, yes. And he didn't pass that on to you later? Or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: He didn't give it back to me.

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, actually, his son-in-law, after he died, found some of them, and he knew the story and he gave some of them back.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: He did? [Laughs.] Do you still have those, or no?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got some. Those things—in some ways, I try not to let clutter my thinking.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There's so many things that I have, but I want to—I try to concentrate on where the—I think the important collecting is—important art, actually.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. Yes. Yes. So, how would you say that you then—well, actually, I wanted to sort of get a little bit into Maida. I mean, you had this model, really, of family collecting, in some ways.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you know, you've always said that you—it was your collection together, and that you worked together on forming a collection.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did she—I was sort of interested if you wanted to go into a little bit about her background. Did she have a similar—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, she had a more formal background than I did.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Her mother had gone to Columbia and studied with Meyer Shapiro.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And was a fairly knowledgeable person. [00:16:01] More than fairly—she would be mad at me if I said fairly.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Maida's father had gone to Harvard, and was someone who kind of absorbed knowledge in whatever field was in front of him. And they were collecting, and Maida collected, from the time she was a young girl, in 20th-century prints. And she had some pretty good things. And that's the sort of gifts that they would give at birthday time, and things of that nature. But she was able to draw and do watercolors. She had—as a young girl, she had some very good skill. And I've seen some of watercolors she did as a 12, 13, 14-year-old. She didn't continue with it, but they really were interesting works. And later, reflected in some of the things we collected. She did a wonderful set of watercolors of flowers.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we ended up collecting 17th-century watercolors of flowers. And maybe that was part of the momentum behind it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Well, I sort of want to go a little chronologically, like. So, when you were at Harvard in the early '50s, you had the Fogg there. And you wrote articles for the *Crimson* about exhibition reviews. Did you get right into that? Or how did—what was your relationship with the Fogg like, as an undergrad?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I was on the *Harvard Crimson*. I was actually managing editor. And I had to dummy the paper every day. It came out every day except Sunday, and sometimes Sunday when there was a special story. And I had to take into account the interest of the Fogg, and the students who were interested in art. [00:18:03] I was not taking major art courses, and I wasn't involved—I had my hands full with the daily work at the *Crimson.*

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: What you majoring in?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was majoring in government, and I had economics as a minor.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I did take a couple of art courses. I took what they called "Darkness at Noon," which was the survey course in Fine Arts.

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the reason they called it "Darkness at Noon" was that they met at noon and they turned all the lights out and showed slides.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was a great course. I mean, Harvard had great art teachers. I didn't take advantage of them until later. But it was quite an extraordinary opportunity for students there. And at Harvard, at that time, I was not as conscious of it as I became later. They were still breaking new grounds in art connoisseurship, and scholarship, and study, and teaching. Subsequently, I've really gotten to understand exactly what was going on.

And even then, people didn’t quite understand it. But they had some extraordinary people there. And the father—the person who really did the most on collecting of drawings in this country was Paul Sachs. Paul Sachs had been a partner in his family investment firm. And he was interested in investment, and all sorts of things—the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe, and every type of investment. But he loved Old Master drawings. [00:20:04]

And he picked that up somewhere—involvement with Europe, perhaps. It wasn’t an American collecting area, very much. And Paul Sachs began collecting Old Master drawings in 1910. He was active in 1912, '15. He actually came back to Harvard, and then he left his investment firm and started teaching at Harvard. And he and Edwin Forbes, who was the director of the Fogg, began to develop drawing courses, and courses in prints. And that was really one of the early educational breakthroughs for art in the United States. And in some ways, much wider, because of—later, went back and forth with Europe and elsewhere. And he had students who loved what he was doing, and they went on to teach others and be curators. It’s a famous group of people in art history, the people who worked with Paul Sachs. I knew Paul Sachs. It’s hard to believe it, because he was quite a bit older than I was, but he had two grandsons who were classmates of mine at Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE ABRAMS: And one of them was a—both of them were friends of mine, but one in particular—and he used to take me on Saturdays for lunch.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Paul Sachs?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, his grandson—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The grandson, Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —with Paul Sachs. [00:22:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I would go into that beautiful house of his, and he had four Degas drawings in the hallway, and other things. I remember I had dinner one night with him, and he looked up at a drawing, and it was a drawing of a soldier—looked like an officer, general, on a horse. A lot of squiggly lines, and a lot of—some wash, but really what impressed me was the number of lines, in a very active drawing. And he said to me, "George, you would do me a great favor if you could tell me who the author was of that drawing." And I said, "Well, Professor Sachs, how long have you owned it?" He said, "35 years." I said, "And you haven’t found out who it is in 35 years?" He said, "No, but I wonder if you could." And I said, "Gee, I don’t know, I have to—all this time?"

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, how old are you at this point?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was probably 28.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he was 65, 66.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he says, "That would be a great favor." Well—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: But you had started collecting by then. You had started your collection.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, let me think exactly. Yes, we had started—I guess I was 30, 31, 32.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: When you started your—

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, when I was with Paul Sachs.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay. He died in '65, right? Or something.

GEORGE ABRAMS: '68, I think.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, in there.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And I never was able to tell him who the author of that drawing was, but I was at a—I was asked to give a talk in Pittsburgh at an opening of a Chatsworth exhibition. [00:24:04]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I went through the exhibition beforehand, and I began my talk this way. I said—I told the story about how I had visited with Paul Sachs, and he asked me if I could help him find out who the author of that drawing was. And I said, "Well, Professor Sachs, I know who the author of that drawing is now. I've gone through this exhibition this morning. And the author of that drawing is the same person who did drawing number one in this exhibition. That's the good news. The bad news is the drawing number one is listed as Anonymous."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was true, they were by the same hand. I'm not going to state it, but I think I got some ideas now who did that drawing. I'm getting closer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Is it a French artist?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, it's an Italian artist. I'm getting closer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you didn't know Paul Sachs as an undergraduate, then?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You didn't go to any of his famous courses? Or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I knew him as an undergraduate because I had met him through his grandson.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I already had my hands full with the other things I was doing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. So, what kind of exhibitions did you review, then? And why did you get into that—because of—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I didn't review them. I really set them up to be reviewed, and sent reviewers.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But, I remember I particularly wanted a review of a Munch exhibition that was on, and I thought was interesting. And there were others. And there were always people trying to get me to put stories in about exhibitions. You know, one of the problems of exhibitions are, if it doesn't get any publicity, it's almost as if it didn't exist. [00:26:04]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I think of the poor curators who work three or four years or longer on putting an exhibition together, and they bring all their knowledge together, and they have the exhibition, and nobody reviews it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, the question is did anybody ever have an exhibition? Who remembers?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. It's like did a tree—you know, forest. [Laughs.] If it fell, did it make a sound.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It can be very unsettling for people.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right. So, you were sensitive to that already, as a—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, and I tried to cover the exhibitions that should be covered.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And were you friends with people as an undergrad as a result of that interest, that later went on to be collectors or curators, and became friends later? Or that didn't, really, particularly? From that period of your life, that wasn't a way to make friends—

GEORGE ABRAMS: My class had—I was active in my class, and I ultimately was chief marshal. And I knew a

great many of my classmates. And I was on the *Crimson* with Dick Oldenburg, who subsequently became director of the Museum of Modern Art. And I knew Marvin Sadik, who was head of the American Portrait Gallery in Washington. And Carter Brown was a couple of classes behind me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And for some reason, I did know those people fairly well. So, I had friends that were deeply committed to art.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Melvin Sadik, okay. And what about law school?

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's Marvin.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Marvin, I'm sorry. I'm thinking of Mel Seiden. Yes, Marvin.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. Right.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. And Dick Oldenburg, too. [00:28:00] I'm supposed to write these down. Harvard Law, your years in Harvard Law after that. Sort of same thing? Too busy with law school to, you know—how would you characterize that?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, I did a very bad thing from the point of view of Harvard Law School. In my—at the end of my freshman year—you know, you go to law school, and it's pretty serious, and you got to spend all your time, and they tell you that law is a jealous mistress, and they go on and on. At the end of my freshman year, I was supposed to go work with a law firm, and I didn't. I took a job in the Netherlands working with a Dutch group called NBBS [Nederlands Bureau voor Buitenlandse Studentenbetrekkingen], which was semi-supported by the Dutch government, on student tourist programs and activities. And I didn't work for a law firm after my—in the summer of my freshman year, and I ran around the Netherlands, and did a little traveling besides. But that's when I really fell in love with Dutch art.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Now, did you go to—did you choose that job because you wanted to go to the Netherlands? Because you wanted to go to Europe? Because you wanted to—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I didn't even choose that job—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —it came to me. I was minding my own business and studying in my room in law school, and I got a call, and it was the dean of Harvard College, Delmar Leighton, who I knew fairly well because of my *Crimson* work and activities. I got to know most of the—a lot of the faculty. McGeorge Bundy was dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. We had James Schlesinger around, Caspar Weinberger had been on the *Crimson*. I knew a lot of those people, and Delmar Leighton was just kind of a friend of mine. And he called me and said, "You know, I just had some people in here, and they're representing the Dutch student group, and the Dutch government. [00:30:10] And the Dutch run these trips in the summer. And they're looking for someone to put out a ship newspaper and then work in Holland."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: "And I thought of you, and I decided I wanted to get you to do something other than law, because I think there's hope for you somehow."

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he said, "I'm going to send these people down and you talk to them, and if—maybe you might do something good, if you do something different this summer."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And so, he sent down, and there were three Dutch people my age. Nice guys. And they said, "Come take this job, you fit our criteria. And we'll be on the trip with you, and we'll do the things in Holland." And I liked them, and I [. . . agreed –GA]. Well, and when I told my father what I was doing—he, of course, was a lawyer—he wasn't overjoyed. But I did it, with some resistance. And it was a good thing, it changed my view of a lot of things.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, was that your first time to the Netherlands?

GEORGE ABRAMS: First time in Europe.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: First time in Europe. So, the matchbook collecting was not—

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —you didn't travel to get those matchbooks.

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No, okay. So, it was your first time in Europe, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I landed in Rotterdam—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and I went to Amsterdam. I remember at that time their dollar was three-point-six guilders to a dollar. That I didn't realize as fully as I should have, that that was an extraordinary exchange rate. [00:32:03] But Europe was recovering from the war, and they still had—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: This is '55?

GEORGE ABRAMS: '55, '56, yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they—and the U.S. was trying to assist through the Marshall Plan, and other things.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But the exchange rate between dollar and pounds and dollar and guilders and francs was extraordinarily pro-dollar. And three-point-six guilders was to a dollar. The Dutch always told me that the guilder to them was like a dollar to me. And I think that may have been so. I remember I went to Amsterdam, and got a room in a bed-and-breakfast that was on the Singel canal.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was a wonderful, huge room—anteroom. And it looked out over the Singel, and it was terrific. And it was two-point-five guilders.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: A day?

GEORGE ABRAMS: A day.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, my goodness.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But that was okay, because you got a full breakfast with it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that's how the exchange rate was, so—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, you arrive at beautiful Amsterdam, and do you go right to the Rijksmuseum? Did you just walk around? Were you busy? Or how did this first time in—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I was with my Dutch friends, and we were in and out of Leiden, but we mostly were in Leiden and Amsterdam, and then I went to Rotterdam again. And I did go to museums, and I liked them. [00:34:00] And I started going whenever I could. So, I went to the Rijksmuseum, and I was overwhelmed by how wonderful it was. And then, I went to The Hague, and the Mauritshuis. And I remember going to Haarlem, which I loved, and sitting in that beautiful square looking at the—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: St. Bavo.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —St. Bavo. And looking at the kind of old buildings around.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, going into the Frans Hals Museum, and—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Was the Teylers open then, or—?

GEORGE ABRAMS: The Teylers was open. It was not so much an art museum, and they didn't have the drawings up.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But what they had up was scientific instruments and medals, which attracted me. I thought that was interesting. And it was more—it wasn't what I considered an art museum, and I didn't put it high on that list.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The ones I most appreciated were the Rijksmuseum, the Boijmans, the Mauritshuis was special, and so was—well, I particularly liked—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: In Leiden, what's there? I was thinking the Lakenhal was not—was it even—I don't know the history of the Lakenhal.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I remember seeing that portrait by Lucas van Leyden in the Lakenhal.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that made an impression upon me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, was this sort of like your first exposure to Dutch art? Because, I mean, what did the Fogg have back then? Not so much. And you hadn't really—you had been to the MFA—I mean, the MFA had it, you know.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I think it was my first immersion. [00:36:02]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. You had been aware of it.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had been aware. And you know, the Fogg, it had one exhibition of Rembrandt drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, in the '50s, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But not when I was an undergraduate. I think it was in 1960.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And other than that, American museums had had no exhibitions of drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it wasn't—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And Dutch art—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —it wasn't a collecting area in the United States.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The moguls of the '80s and '90s collected Rembrandt, and Frans Hals, and Ruisdael, and they stopped right there.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, you mean, of the Gilded Age.

GEORGE ABRAMS: American—yes, Gilded Age. And they stopped right there.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: They weren't interested in the minor masters.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I wasn't aware of minor masters, and the museums didn't exhibit them very much.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And Sachs was interested in Italian, French.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Sachs' great interest was not in the Dutch area, other than interest in some of the great

artists. But not in the Dutch area. And Agnes Mongan, who was his assistant and person who took up for him, was interested in French.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Italian, to a lesser extent.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And other people in the field kind of made fun of the Dutch, they were too commonplace. They were plebian.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And when I immersed myself, when I went and worked in the Netherlands, I had seen things that I didn't know existed before.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: They hadn't been in America.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I realized that drawings, despite Paul Sachs' great influence and the fact that Harvard was involved, were not really in the forefront of American museums or collecting. [00:38:14]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. And you realized that, those years when you—that time when you were in Holland doing that project—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, and I looked at what had happened vis-à-vis drawings, and I saw that the two collections that—or three collections, which people mentioned if you mentioned Old Master drawings, were the Morgan Library, Yale, and the Met.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I went in the early '60s and looked at those collections. Now, the Morgan Library had bought—Morgan had bought, en masse, a collection put together by a British artist, and it included Dutch drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Charles Fairfax Murray?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Charles Fairfax Murray. And it included Dutch drawings, but they didn't add much.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Since 19—what was it? 1905? Or [190]6?

GEORGE ABRAMS: 1910 or [190]6, something, you know. They didn't add much.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the Met had the Vanderbilt collection, but it wasn't a good collection. Yale had the Egmont book—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, which is a lot of—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —which had some good things, but not a lot.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE ABRAMS: And there was Bowdoin out there, which—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —where John Smibert, a painter—an English painter who came to America and became an American figure—had collected drawings. And the Smibert collection was bought by James Bowdoin and given to the college. [00:40:03]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they had a collection, which contains some interesting misnamed people in large measure, but some interesting drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, let me get—I don't want to get too—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I'm trying to go slowly, because it's all interesting. It's really—you know, teasing it apart. But, so, you're in Holland, you come back, and you've seen now, a lot of Dutch art, but now you finish law school. Do you meet Maida after that? Sort of between '57, '60? Get married in there? Or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Maida and I got married in 1960.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: She was a classmate of my sister's at Sarah Lawrence.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And she had majored in—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Your younger sister, then?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I'm assuming, I don't know why.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yep. She had majored in philosophy, and had a minor in art.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And she'd done art and made art there, too. Some. She was great with her hands. I say that she didn't do paintings and drawings very much, but she could weave, and she could knit, and she could tat, and she could do all of the amazing things with—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did I read she made her own clothes often?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Somewhere. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: She would make her own clothes, and she could make rugs. And she found a field, which she spent her life working in. She became an occupational therapist who worked with special needs children, and built programs for special needs children. And she would use her arts in those programs. And she would teach children how to do the things she could do.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: She set up festivals all over Boston, where students would come—they had mixed students—special needs and non-special needs—and they would do art for a day. [00:42:02] And it would absorb the special needs students so that they would be participating and doing art, and excited about it, and it would let them be working with non-special needs students in a way they related. And she translated that into we should be doing education in that way.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, she set up a program in Newton, where we lived, where the special needs community knew that she was available regularly at the Newton community center, to work with special needs kids in art areas.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Making art, making clothes, making pottery. And she got other people who got interested—other artists and others. And then, Newton came to her and said, "Why don't we set up a program in the Newton school system?"

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Nice.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And she did. And she set up programs in nine different elementary schools. And she would travel almost every day from one to the other, and work on programs. She would get artists to come help. And that program became an enormous success. And then, because of her relationship with the Kennedy family—my relationship with Ted Kennedy—they got interested, and thought that this might be something special. And the person who really got interested was Ted Kennedy's sister, Jean Kennedy Smith. And Maida and Jean worked on it and set up Very Special Arts, which Ted got funded in the U.S. Congress. [00:44:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that had national programs of using the arts to work with the special needs population. They began to develop all sorts of national programs. And Maida set up a Very Special Arts Massachusetts, which developed programs, and later they were picked up by the national group. And then, became a major organization. We raised money for her, and she did everything you can imagine, and became a model, not only in Massachusetts, but nationally, and internationally.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wow. So, when she—do you want to break now?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, I'm fine.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. So, okay. So, you got married in the late '50s there, before—

GEORGE ABRAMS: 1960.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: 1960. Oh, right, that's what you said, 1960, which is the same year that you bought your first drawing. Am I correct? From Hyman Swetzoff, who was a—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, well—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —or maybe there was a different story, which you would like to tell.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —well, you know, I think back—for some reason, I may have had more art involvements than I've indicated so far—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —because I came out of law school in 1957, and started practicing. I went in the service and came back, and I was back in April of '58. And I ended up representing a lot of Boston artists.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. So, this—

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, I must have had more involvement than people—than I realized. I represented people who are—Boston school people, who I think were wonderful artists. Draftsmen and other things. [00:46:00] And haven't taken off in the art world, although they're known. I represented—well, first Hyman Swetzoff, who was a dealer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Was he also an artist?

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was an artist, he was a writer—he wrote on [Odilon] Redon. He knew much more than most of the other people about certain artists.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was very interested in James Ensor, and did the first exhibition of James Ensor works in the United States. He was very into Redon, and did some wonderful exhibitions. And, actually, worked with the Museum of Modern Art on a Redon exhibition, where he translated and worked on the French. And he was—he did the first exhibition of Mondrian watercolors of flowers. And he had some 22 watercolors that Mondrian had done.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: He owned them?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He got them from a New York dealer who had put them together. And I remember that exhibition, it was so beautiful. And they cost between six-hundred and eighteen-hundred dollars each. Well, that was a lot of money in 1963, or [196]4.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But in hindsight, it wasn't.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he was interested in Old Master drawings, but not as a dealer. He was dealing in modern art, and he represented Hyman Bloom, who was a great draftsman, and is recognized as such now, still, in the Boston area. And had had a showing at the Museum of Modern Art of his paintings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [00:48:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Harold Tovich was another artist, and he had had a one-man show at the Guggenheim. And Hyman represented a lot of these people, and I ended up inheriting them, in some ways. And we used to spend time with them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: How did you meet Hyman?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Hyman Swetzoff?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had another client, who was friendly with a roommate, or a friend of my older sister, who knew—the person was the director of the school of—the museum of Fine Arts School.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Fine Arts School. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I represented him on some matters, and then he referred some artists to me. And they referred Hyman to me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, so it was sort of a snowball effect, you got one and then you got another, and you became—

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, I had them all. [Laughs.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And then, you were the dealer-artists' lawyer for the Boston— [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I did. And one of the incentives was that I hardly ever charged them much.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But they were interesting, sometimes they gave me art, and I used to—I remember Maida and I used to have dinner with Hyman Swetzoff, and Hyman Bloom, and Harold Tovich, and we would spend time with them. But Hyman Swetzoff, unlike other dealers, was interested in Old Master drawings from a personal point of view.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he knew the field. And he traveled to Europe, and I got interested, and he educated me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. So, he had some Old Master drawings. [00:50:02] And—

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he even went there, bought them, brought some back, and then sold some. And people knew if they came in, he might have Old Master drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, was that sort of the first person who sort of—I know you bought your first one from him, but was he also the first person who really made you interested in them?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I didn't buy my first drawing from him.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, I read that somewhere, sorry. Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: No. Maida and I went to an auction in Boston.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. This is your first drawing, okay. Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: First Dutch drawing—well, we had some others.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] It's a slippery slope.

GEORGE ABRAMS: You know, drawings are a wonderful field. They're very different than paintings. You can have lots of drawings, and you can go through the feeling of acquiring something you love many times, versus a painting person. Unless that painting person amasses a huge collection.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, we went to an auction. We used to—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: This is around 1960-ish?

GEORGE ABRAMS: 1960.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was [owned by –GA] a man, an auctioneer I knew named Louis Joseph. And he had an auction house on Commonwealth Avenue.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he was a nice man, and we were friends. And I remember there was an auction there. And I don't know whether I bought this earlier, or some time in an early period—he had a wonderful drawing, pastel, of a snow scene on a farm, by Charles-Francois Daubigny.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Nice.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was signed, dated 1872, and I thought it was quite a beautiful thing. And I bought it at the auction. [00:52:01] $80, something like that. And I liked it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, this was really your first sort of auction purchase—

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, I already knew Swetzoff, and I remember we had done some things with him.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But it was scattered, and no direction to it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But then, Louis Joseph, about that time, had an auction sale. And in that sale in an old frame was a little watercolor, of what is either an old man, or an old woman. It's a little hard to tell. With a cap, and kind of—very prominent cheeks, and nice skin color. And it was kind of a charming, odd sort of thing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I liked it. And so, we bought it. Well, it was supposed to be, and it turned out to be, by Cornelis Dusart—a Dutch artist. I didn't know anything about him at the time, but as a lawyer, you know, you follow up on things, and I looked him up, and I found out about him. And he had been a student of Adriaen van Ostade, and I had this drawing. And it was in his estate as a particular lot number, and there was a note on the back of the drawing. And it had been owned and was sold by an estate of a Mrs. Simpson. And so, I started to figure about provenances. And I looked up the estate, and I found out about Mrs. Simpson. And she had died in her 90s. [00:54:01] But she was well known in the Boston area, because she drove an electric car, and that was unusual. [Laughs.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes—[laughs]—still.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And she was a character. And this was a drawing that she owned. And I liked it a lot. And I thought, well, this is interesting. I better keep going and think about Dutch art.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, now you're in Boston, you're around artists, and this Dutch drawing appears, and it sort of clicks in with some—you know, your travels.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yep.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, Maida and I went to Europe, 1961, for a couple of weeks in the summer. Hyman Swetzoff gave us names of galleries and places. Particularly in London, and then, some in Amsterdam. I'm not sure whether it was '61 or '62. I could check that. And we started meeting some of these people. Well, they were very receptive, because there weren't many Americans, and we met Alfred Brod, who was a major dealer in London.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he was nice to us. Some people found him difficult, I found him wonderful. And he was interested in Dutch drawings, and he had a great many Dutch drawings that he bought. He would scoop things up. Some of them good, some of them so-so. But that was in a field he was doing. He was a refugee—came to London from Czechoslovakia. He had a lovely woman working with him by the name of Julia Krauss. Later became a well-known dealer, but she dealt with him until he died. [00:56:00] And she was very nice to us. She had a son who we met. He said he had never seen an American collecting Dutch drawings—not young.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, were you already—did you ask Hyman to send you to dealers that dealt in Dutch drawings, or just to introduce you to the trade?

GEORGE ABRAMS: To the trade dealers.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And so, he said, "Let me tell you what I'll do." He said, "I'm going to put you in a room. I'm going to give you a great number of drawings, perhaps as many as a hundred Dutch drawings. You look through them, and you tell me what you like. And we'll see if we can do something."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. So, this is you and Maida.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yep. So, we sat in a room, and I remember Julia Krauss brought us some grapes, and we had a whole batch of grapes. And there was one drawing after another. Some of which we really liked. And we put aside six.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And there was one that we particularly liked, I was shocked at it. It was a small landscape drawing, pen-and-ink, by Jan van Goyen. It was early 1625. I held it in the palm of my hand. And I looked at it, and I thought, this drawing was done in 1625. It's now 1962. How many years ago was that? And look, it's still in good condition. It's small, but beautiful. It's magical. [00:58:02] Well, that really caught me. And I thought, my God, you can still find things like this—

[Sound of ringing telephone.]

[Audio break.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I thought, my God, you can still find things that were done three or four hundred years ago that are in good condition, and are wonderful. It's a miracle.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, we put aside six, and Alfred Brod came back, and I told him my reaction. He gave me a very fair price on the drawing, and—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You want to say what it was, or no? Do you remember?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I think it was $400, which was a lot of money—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Which is a fair amount back then, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —yes. But he had paid something like $360 from Boerner for it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay. C. G. Boerner. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He wasn't making much money on it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we bought three others, and then we thanked him and said we would be back. And we became, over the years, very good friends with him. As close as you can imagine. And he would put aside drawings for us, and really tried to help us.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, on that same trip, did you go anywhere else? Or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, we saw, perhaps, 10, 12 dealers in London.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wow.

GEORGE ABRAMS: We went to the auction houses, we met Richard Day, who was just starting with drawings at Sotheby's. And they were just beginning to do sales where they were emphasizing drawings, and putting photographs of drawings, whereas previously they hadn't done any of that. [01:00:10] And we went to Christie's. And I don't know whether it was that year, but two or three years later, we spent time with Noel Annesley who became a very close friend, and helped us over the years.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, in this first, you know, sort of experience of buying, you know, a number of drawings, you were sitting there with Maida and the two of you discussed it, or you knew each other well enough to sort of —

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, we would put aside certain things—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Together, and then sort of—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and we would discuss it. And she had a really good instinct for drawings that were special, beautiful, or had impact. And I had a lot of interest in how it fits into a picture of Dutch art, and who the artist was, and what sort of work he did, and the historical aspect.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But back then—so, were you starting, like, you know, to sort of devour books on Dutch art? And, I mean, how did you know who Jan van Goyen was at that point, you know? In the beginning.

GEORGE ABRAMS: We were beginning to not only devour books—we had a library that we were building.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we went—there are certain basic books you can start with, and we had those pretty quickly. Walther Bernt did a four-volume set on drawings, Dutch drawings, and we studied that very closely. And we went to the British Museum and spent time looking at artists there—Dutch artists. [01:02:04] That was by '63, '64.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Trying to think. Who was the keeper there then? Poplar was still there?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, John Gere was there.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Gere, mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he was—I liked John Gere. He's very English and a little bit—he was a little bit controlled, in terms of his emotions, but he was nice, and I think we got along pretty well. Then came John Rowlands.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I knew John Rowlands very well.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And how did these Brits take to you? Like, what you're saying—you know, Brod was kind of surprised you were Americans—was that the general feeling? Did you feel like you were sort of—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And they were—I mean, Dutch drawings were not what most of the dealers were interested in.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: They were reflecting the interests of museum specialists. Jacob Bean at the Met—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Italian.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —wouldn't buy a Dutch drawing. Wasn't of interest to him. So, he was interested in Italian

and French, and they were—now, the sales room began to have some Dutch drawings. Richard Day was interested in them, and he had a sale in '63, could have been '64—from Dr. C. R. Rudolf, where Rudolf put in a number of drawings, and there was a sale that wasn't a one-person sale that followed it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Where there was some other Dutch drawings. And we put bids in on that sale with Richard Day. We didn't get anything out of the Rudolf group in that sale, but we did get some things in the later part. [00:02:08]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And did you meet Rudolf at that time? You did eventually meet him, right?

GEORGE ABRAMS: We met him, and we met him—we were actually trying to buy a Lambert Doomer drawing of two camels in a landscape.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we bid on it, but got outbid by Alfred Brod.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, we went down to the Brod Gallery, and we thought we would try to buy it from him. It had gone fairly high. It was a beautiful drawing. As we got to the Brod Gallery, Dr. Rudolf emerged, and under his arm was the Lambert Doomer. He had just acquired it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. Oh, already? Okay. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And we missed it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That time. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, later on, we got to know him pretty well, but he would never give that drawing up. We bought a lot of wonderful drawings from him when he was getting rid of some of his things and was retired, and in his 80s. But in his estate sale in Amsterdam, that drawing came up. And I bought it. And I had so much association with it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it's a wonderful drawing. It's one of my favorites.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. So, when you started, you've always said, you know, you didn't have so much money, you had a new practice or—you know. And probably your children were starting to be born in there, I'm assuming.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And had schools and things, yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: They had school. One interview talked about you traveling to Europe with your kids on buying trips and things. [00:04:04] What was that like, and how did they feel about it?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, we did take them a couple of times, mostly to see London or Amsterdam.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: They weren't on buying trips with us, they were on trips to see—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and they weren't involved with it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But any time I'm in the vicinity of a dealer, especially in Europe, who had drawings, I would invariably end up taking a look to see what's around.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And they knew that that was coming.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It didn't take much time, you know. They would go out for lunch, and I would go off to see a dealer, I mean.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, right. Would you say that every time you went on a trip that you would come back with a few sheets? Or one sheet at least, or many sheets, or—? [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It would vary on what would happen. I remember once I went to London over a period that led up to Labor Day, and I found seven wonderful drawings that Rudolf was willing to part with. And I bought them, and took them home. And they weren't expensive, considering what they might be. And I was thinking, I love these so much, and they're so much better than the money I paid for them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Now, that was one question I was thinking of asking, was—the first drawing you purchased, or the first few, was there any sense of, you know, kind of parting with the money, like, a difficulty? Or was it always just more the desire? The money just didn't really matter, you really just wanted the drawing, and the money was sort of, you know, incidental, as long as you could dig it up somewhere? [00:06:05] Or how did—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, let me really talk a little bit about the money. I was practicing law. I didn't inherit, my sisters inherited. I didn't, because my parents considered me to be okay, and they had confidence that I didn't need anything.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Thanks a lot. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, and I was okay.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I always felt poor, because I had things I wanted to buy, and I didn't have the money to buy it. And I was continually seeing drawings that I wanted that I had to figure out how to get.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And, you know, what's the definition of somebody who's poor? Somebody who desperately needs and wants things and doesn't know how to pay for them, or get them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, that was me all the time. And whenever I had a case I won, where I got a fee, I would spend it right away.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I had lots of things I knew I wanted. Now, I remember—[laughs]—this is kind of a funny story. I was in Amsterdam, and a collection that had been formed by a friend of mine, [C. F.] Louis de Wild, for a fellow by the name of Kramer, came up in Amsterdam. And in it was a fantastic Goltzius drawing of a nude woman. And I loved it, and Louis de Wild loved it. [00:08:00] Kramer didn't like it as much as we did. He had it in a drawing solander box, and never put it up.

But it was coming up, and everybody kind of realized it was a good drawing, in terms back then, which is not the astronomical terms we're talking about, but a drawing that stood out. And I remember thinking I would like to buy that. And I saw my friend Peter Schatborn at the Rijksmuseum, and he said the Rijksmuseum probably would be buying that. He thought they were interested and would I perhaps not go after it. And I said okay. Then I ran into Bram Meij, who was the head of the Rotterdam Print Room at the Boijmans. And he said they were going to be bidding on it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "Good luck," and I went home. And the auction took place. And two or three days later, I called Peter and I said, "Well, Peter, did you get the Goltzius?" He said, "No." I said, "So, the Boijmans got it?" He said, "No, Frau [Ruth-Maria] Muthman bought it from C. G. Boerner."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "You got to be kidding me." And he said, "Yes, and the price she paid was not what I thought it would bring. It was below what I thought it would bring." So, I called Frau Muthman. Now, the week before, I had handled a lawsuit and gotten a substantial fee. Substantial—I think it was $30,000. [00:10:05] That's a good fee in those days. And I said, "You bought that Goltzius?" She said, yes. She was a friend of mine. And I said, "Do you still have it?" She said, yes. I said, "I'm going to come see you." She said, "When?" And I said, "Tomorrow."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And you're in Boston now?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: She's in—

GEORGE ABRAMS: In Dusseldorf.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I flew over and I said, "I want to buy it." She said, "Well, I'll sell it to you fairly." And she took a reasonable profit. And I took the drawing. And that was—the money was gone. And a little bit more, but I had the drawing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, the drawing's a great masterpiece, you know, and it's special. When I was doing that, I knew they were special, and I knew that they were not at a price level they should be at, but I didn't know whether they would go up or down. I just knew that they were worth more to me than the money was.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, did this ever cause friction with Maida, or did she just understand and be, like, "Great, let's go ahead." Or—you don't have to answer that either. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The most amazing thing, it did not cause friction with her.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: She absolutely understood and encouraged it. You know, there's a big difference when you get encouragement to do that—you're a little crazy, you know. But the difference was that we were able to get things that we probably never would have been able to get otherwise.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. So, she really—yes, she was into—just as eager.

GEORGE ABRAMS: She got it and knew, when a drawing was really special, she would push me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that was—I might have been more cautious.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: But you had her kind of encouraging you.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Now, we went to the—we looked at the Chatsworth sale.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Now, we're already in '80—early '80s.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, maybe that's too far.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, let's stay in the '60s for a minute. I remember a story—I thought you had told me, maybe someone else did, and maybe this is a story about somebody else—but maybe it was in the '60s. Did you ever have an idea—the two of you—that you would only have 100 drawings? Or was that some other collector that you told me about? [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Okay.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It's the best story.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had a—you know, part of collecting is that you can meet some wonderful people. Not all are wonderful—some of them aren't, but most of the drawing people are very interesting, and often wonderful. And I've got memories of people I really think fondly about all the time. One of my—one of the people I really thought fondly of, and I liked a lot, was a man by the name of Winslow Ames.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Winslow Ames was a gentleman, and he wrote books on English history. And I mean, your definition of, I guess, a kind of patrician. And he was so gentle, and classy, and knowledgeable, and erudite. And so, I used to visit Winslow Ames quite a bit. Maida and I would go, and his wife [Anna –GA]. [00:14:00] And they lived in Little Compton by the time we got to know them really well. He had been a—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: In Rhode Island?

GEORGE ABRAMS: —yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He had been a director of a number of museums. He was an Andover graduate, and a Yale graduate—or maybe Harvard, I'm not sure. But, been a director of a number of Midwestern museums. And, in the McCarthy era, they had wanted him to take a loyalty oath, and he refused on principle to do that, and was dismissed from his job, and came back to Rhode Island. Well, he collected drawings, and he had very good taste. And he collected in all schools. I used to visit him with Maida, and we would have lunch with him and look at things. And he had explained to me that he had a way of collecting. His way was to cap his collection at 100 drawings. He didn't want his collection to collect him. He wanted to collect the drawings.

So, he made a point of it when he had a hundred—after he had a hundred drawings, that every time he bought one, he would sell one. And that was a strict rule he had. And I admired him, I said, "I don't have that sort of discipline, and you're a much better person than I am," and so on. And one day, we were visiting him, and we were looking at some drawings. And he showed me a couple of things that he had gotten recently. Said he had sold a couple. And I said I was going to go to the bathroom. And by mistake, I opened the wrong door. [00:16:00] And there was a mass of framed drawings in there. I said, "Winslow, what are these?" He said, "That's not part of the collection."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I understood that he wasn't in quite as much control as he thought. I have another story about him, though. He loved Old Master drawings, and he was someone who was knowledgeable in languages and history. And there had been a book written by a man by the name of Meder—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, Joseph Meder.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —a German writer, on Old Master drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Sure.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was in German.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The *Handzeichnungen*.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was in German.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh, yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Winslow decided that it would be important for the field to translate that into English. And he worked on it and worked on it, and he finally completed his translation. And then, he tried to get it published, and he couldn't find a publisher. And he was struggling. And I said, "Winslow, I'm going to help you." And I went out. I found a publisher for him. And the book got published. I don't think anybody reads it; I don't know why. I think now that I'm talking about it, I'm going to go read it when I get home. But it got published, and he was thrilled. And one day, there's a—he gives me a call and said, "I'm coming by." And he comes by and he says, "I'm so happy to have my book published. And I know you always loved my Abraham Furnerius drawing, which is one of my best. [00:18:04] And I thought I want you to have it."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, wow.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "Winslow, I can't do that. That's a valuable drawing. I can't do it." He said, "No, I want you to do it." And I said, "Well, Winslow, I'll only do it under one condition, I'm going to write out a check for $5,000, and you're going to take the check, and we'll consider it mostly a gift, but that I've done something to help pay for it, too." And he finally—he tried to stop me, but he finally said okay. And I got that drawing. I love that drawing. It's wonderful.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the association with him is special.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, were there a lot of—well, we'll go back to that, to just—so, when you formed—that was him, not you, with the 100 drawings. But did you, just from the beginning, you just collected a lot, and sort of made room for them in your house. Did you always have that house in Newton? Or did you have to move to a new—I mean, how did the—as the collection was growing, how did you deal with it physically?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, the first thing I did was to start to concentrate on Dutch. I had acquired drawings in other schools.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You had, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Not a lot, but some really wonderful drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had a Whistler drawing of the Grand Canal in Venice. Beautiful, small drawing. And I had Guercino and a lot of—not a lot—a number of other drawings by rather good artists, and good examples. [00:20:09] Now, another person who was helpful to me and I was friendly with was Robert Light—Bob Light.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, yes. Okay. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Bob Light was a dealer in Boston, and I was his lawyer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I did everything with Bob, and we would sometimes go to auction sales together in London. He was the only one who understood the international feel of the auction field. He was dealing with all the major museums, and all those—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Is this in the '60s still? Or is this—

GEORGE ABRAMS: '60s.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we did a number of things together and we learned a lot. And I would sometimes have Bob sell or trade drawings that weren't Dutch, in order to acquire Dutch drawings. And he would know where they were. He was good in his knowledge, and he really kept track of everything. This was before he moved to Santa Barbara. And I have a story about how I learned that Bob Light had become a great dealer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There are dealers who are good dealers, and so forth, but Bob Light was a great dealer, unlike most dealers. You know, most of them deal in many things, but he was dealing in masterpieces. But I first became suspicious that Bob Light had become a great dealer when we were at an auction sale in London, and it was a painting sale, and a Bassano came up. [00:22:01] And the world's record for Bassano at that time in the '60s was about £80,000.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the painting came up, and we watched it. It went 40, 60, 80, 100, 200, 300. It went for £800,000 pounds.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wow.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I turned to Bob Light and said, "Who was the crazy person who bought that painting?" And he said, "I was." I hadn't even known he was bidding—well, he was bidding for a California collector. What's his name? Famous collector.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It's not Carter.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He's got a museum.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Getty?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No. He's got the other museum.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, Norton Simon?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was buying it for Norton Simon. Well, I was suspicious he had become a great dealer, but

I wasn't sure. Then I remember I found in an auction sale in Germany a drawing by an artist that I didn't know much about—nobody did. Dutch artist by the name of Cornelis Vroom. But it was beautiful. And I called Bob and I said, "Are you going to that sale in Germany?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Would you bid on a drawing for me?" He said, "Sure."

I said, "It's in the lot number such-and-such, it's Cornelis Vroom. They're estimating it at 2 to $4,000. You can go to six." He said, "Okay." Well, he went off and then he came back, and he was due back on a Sunday. And I remember I was dialing him. And he finally arrived home, and I got him, I said, "Bob, Bob, what happened to that drawing?" He said, "You won't believe what happened." I said, "What?" He said, "It went for $15,000." [00:24:02] I said, "Bob, who was the crazy fool who bought that drawing?" He said, "You were."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was one of the great drawings. Vroom only did 25—George Keyes wrote his catalogue raisonné, and he gave him 36. And I wrote an article and pointed out that 11 of the 36 were by Hendrick Vroom, his father. And that four of the others—not Dusseldorf, Hamburg—two of the others had been scribbled on by an 18th-century person. So, there's about 20, 23.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You have two? How many—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I have two.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You have two.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I actually—I have two that are sure.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He's very special, and my two are two of my all-time favorites, although I gave that beautiful one with the fence to Harvard. It was hard doing that, but I did.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, when you were—how often did you have others buy for you? And how—you know.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had to be careful because I was pretty well known.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And if I were bidding, people would kind of—I have some examples. I'd come into the picture, that wouldn't be there otherwise. So, I had to do various things in the auction room. Now, early on, we met Hans Calmann, who was a dealer in London.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was a refugee, and in some ways, I could have been sympathetic with him, but he was imperious and difficult. And later—well, he was hard to like, but he maybe should have been easier to like. [00:26:05] And I remember when Maida and I were, in the mid-'60s, we're looking at drawings in the auction rooms. We went in and were looking at a drawing at Sotheby's—a David Bailly drawing of 1621, of Jan Pynas. Very interesting drawing, one I wanted. And Calmann came up to us and said, "Well, what are you doing in the auction room?" This is in '65. And I said, "Well, we're looking at drawings." He said, "Well, you know, the drawing area and auctions are really for people who are in the trade, and I'm quite certain that should you be interested in something, you probably would not be successful."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.].

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "Well, I'm sorry to hear that." And the auction occurred, and the Bailly came up, and I thought it was going to go through the roof, but for some reason, neither the Rijksmuseum or the Boijmans was bidding on it. It's such a natural with Bailly, Leiden, and Jan Pynas, in a great drawing. Well, I started bidding at a very low level—£400, £500. Not low in 1965 money, but low in value. And Calmann at that time, the dealers all sat around a little table. And the auction house had a young man walk the drawings around—and there were about 12 people at the table, all dealers. [00:28:08] And they would pull it over and look at it. And it would go around, and they would bid.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: What about you? Where were you?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was in the back sitting with the empty chairs around me. And so, I was bidding, and he turned, and he looked at me and he smiled, and he put his hand up. And I bid again, and he smiled again, he put his hand up again. And I looked at him, and I shook my head. And Herbert Bier, who was another London dealer,

in the corner—B-I-E-R—in the corner put up his hand, and Calmann didn't continue bidding. And Bier bought it. And I had to look contrite and defeated, but I was happy because Herbert Bier was bidding for me under arrangements I had made the day before with him. So, I did have people who bid for me, and when I bought some major things, I often was using signals and ways that people wouldn't know. I'll tell a story when we get up to it about Chatsworth.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Where I had somebody bid for me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, so you sort of—as you went along, you had learned about auctions as a child, so you were somewhat comfortable even just with what goes on—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Never comfortable. I find auctions very unsettling.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: They're nerve-wracking, because you want something and you're going to be uncertain what's going to happen, and you're often pushed above where you would like to be. Of course, you would like to be as low as possible, but you're often pushed above it. And sometimes, you're pushed way above it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. And what is that—that's just, you get into the competitive mode, or the desirous mode? [00:30:04] Or, what do you think?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No interest in the competitive mode.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's really a question that you feel that particular drawing you would like to own, and this is your chance. And if you don't buy it, you won't own it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, when was the first time you bought something and thought, wow, I really shouldn't have spent that much money? Or is there one? [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I often was uncomfortable with what I was pushed to, and I would stop on occasion and be sorry afterwards, sometimes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I had occasions when I was pushed and stayed with it. I can only think of, you know, perhaps 10 where I feel like I just was pushed too high.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But now, you probably don't care too much.

GEORGE ABRAMS: You know, I don't know whether I'm lucky or whatever, and it doesn't come out as lucky in the long run, because I am giving them all away, so I spent the money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But the things I bought seem to go up in a way that's tenfold sometimes, and even more. And I've had—I don't try to make discoveries. I never did, because I think that causes you to make mistakes. You go after things that either, you may buy cheaply, but they're not as good as you really want them to be, or they don't turn out to be what you want.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you always went for something you were sort of sure of. Or you knew—sure you loved it no matter what. I mean—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. [00:32:00] And I never—you know, I mean, sometimes you do, if something's going very cheap, sometimes you're tempted.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I resist that temptation when I can.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, when did—okay, so you're learning about—we're still in the '60s, but you know, there's reasons for it. But, you know, you're learning about Dutch art, you're acquiring—how quickly did your collection grow? So, let's say by '65, how many drawings did you have? By 1965. Would you say.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I'll tell you how we kind of assess that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: We collected quite actively. We would go to Europe and perhaps buy five or six. We would buy two or three in New York. We probably had 100 drawings by the time I went to Washington. And that was 1965, when I went to Washington to run the Senate—I was staff director and general counsel of the Senate Judiciary Committee on Refugees, whose chairman was Ted Kennedy.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: My classmate. And he brought me down there, and we were using that committee as a foreign policy committee, because where refugees were, there were major issues going on. And so, we did hearings on Vietnam—the only committee doing hearings on Vietnam. We had Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy and major people testifying, raising issues about the things that were going wrong with the war, the refugees, civilian casualties, corruption, other issues. [00:34:07] And we did hearings on the Cuban refugees and other things. And I was really busy, and cut out some time to look at drawings, but it wasn't easy. I remember I was sent to the Middle East when the Six-Day War broke out—the third day, in fact. And I stopped in Amsterdam.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I had—there was some activities on refugees in Amsterdam. And I went to two dealers when I could sneak away, and I bought a couple of things, in fact, not knowing whether I would come back or what.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But in 1968, a very good friend of ours, Franklin Robinson, who had been a graduate student at Harvard, and had come over to the house and spend time with us. And was the third grandson of Paul Sachs, who I knew.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay. I didn't realize that.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was the youngest of the grandsons, I guess. And Frank was interested in Dutch drawings. Not many people were. And he was a good scholar, and he wrote his thesis on Metsu, under Seymour Slive.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, we had fun together with drawings. And it was nice to have somebody who liked them the way I did. Frank says now that he felt we were like Johnny Appleseed. We were looking at Dutch drawings, we were finding artists nobody knew about—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [00:36:02]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and we were having an adventure where we were on uncharted territory in the United States.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, he said—and he got his PhD, and he was teaching at Wellesley, and his wife was the director of the museum—and he said to us, "Let's do an exhibition." So, we said, "Gee, we could do that." So, Frank started to line up museums that would like to take the exhibition, and he had Wellesley, Dartmouth, RISD, and Princeton.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: We added UConn and the Ringling. And he put out an exhibition with a wonderful little catalog. And he wrote it and worked on it. And that had 63 drawings in it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Now, what about you—also, your collection still has—or you also did collect paintings and medals and some bronzes, so how did those kind of creep in? [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: We didn't do a lot of that in the '60s—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: In the '60s, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —because we were concentrating on the drawings. We were concentrating on the drawings,

and we hesitated to go. I mean, we were feeling poor anyway, and we were stretching to buy. But when we were frustrated and didn't find drawings, once in a while, we would find a painting. [00:38:04]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: A little painting.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Not so little.

[They laugh].

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the paintings were often not as expensive as the drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: They're two different fields, and they're different collectors, and different prices. So, we did add a few. I remember we added the Cornelis Saftleven and Herman Saftleven painting, which is now a famous painting of a hunter under a tree with dogs around him.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it's been in five or six major exhibitions, but it's—we added that one because it was out there, and we hadn't bought drawings recently, and it wasn't expensive, and I paid for it over a year. And got it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, so by the end of the '60s, you felt like you had a collection. I mean, Franklin Robinson recognized—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, we had the exhibition—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —yes, and then—

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the exhibition looked wonderful, and it held up very well. Now, I haven't gotten into my relationship with Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, but that was an extensive relationship.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Maybe we should just—let's just pause if you don't—since we're still—okay.

[Audio break.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Recording now. Yes, looks like. Okay, so Egbert, also. When did you meet Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I got a call sometime around 1962, and it was Egbert. And he said, "George, I understand you're collecting Dutch drawings, and I want to come visit you."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, he's at Yale at this point?

GEORGE ABRAMS: At Yale.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And how did he know that you were collecting, you think?

GEORGE ABRAMS: You kind of know all those things. There's nobody else around, so—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: There were so few people—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —somebody will say, "There's a young couple out there and they've been collecting Dutch drawings. [00:40:03] They're starting to—they seem to be building a collection," or something.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, already in '62, he was aware of you. That's pretty early on.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And he—well, that was why he called us and said, "Can I come visit?" And I said, sure. So, he came—you know, I think this is outlined somewhere in an article I wrote for Master Drawings [Journal]. And I kept letters that we exchanged and I use them in the article, and also in my talk at the—Egbert's event. And he came, and we looked at drawings. And about—and we had a pretty good time. And about two days later, I get—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Pretty good time. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —two days later, I got a letter from him and it said, "I've made a list of the drawings, which I consider to be of quality." And he went on from there, and I read his letter, and it was a very Dutch-type letter. And then, I wrote him back a note. I said, "Thank you. I noticed in the 30 drawings you listed, which you thought

had quality, that you left out a number that I rather like. Maida and I have a special interest in things that may not be what you would consider exhibitable, but are personally charming." And they're often small drawings.

For instance, the little van Goyen, imagine, and a few other things. [00:42:00] And he wrote back and said, "Well, we were too fast going through; perhaps I misjudged some. Let me come back." And I said, fine. And he came back, and then he wrote me a letter, and said, "My first letter I've decided was too hasty, and that there are a number of other drawings of quality." And then, he wrote about how you should be careful not to buy because you're hoping for a discovery, which I knew. And you're not to buy because you think is not a high price, or that sort of thing. And he was trying to teach me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The professor.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And so, we had some exchanges, but his taste and my taste were different. His taste is an academic taste. He wouldn't like any of the Saftleven. Not interesting from an academic point of view. But I love some aspects of Cornelis Saftleven, when he catches a peasant standing with a drink, obviously to the four winds, you know. Or when he's doing a dog that's related to a hunting scene.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Or a bear. I've got a wonderful drawing of a bear. And other people like that. And he—Maida and I like the watercolor still lifes. The drawings of a mouse. The drawings of tulips by Jacob Marrel. And Peter Holsteyn and Pieter Withoos.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Egbert was not interested in those people.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, first off, you collected things that were more personally charming, would you say? You know, the sort of scenes that appealed to you. [00:44:00] What type of drawing would you say—what genre were you drawn to first?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, it's funny. We visited Paul Sachs, and I showed him photographs of a number of things, and he sat back after a while and said, "Well, I've learned something." I said, "What was that?" He said, "Well, I divide drawing collectors into people collectors and landscape collectors."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: "And you're obviously people collectors, because you've got those genre drawings, you've got those portraits, and you've got things relating to people." And I said, "Well, we've got some landscapes." He said, "Well, look at the preponderance." And I did, and I said, "Well, I guess I better think about that." Which I did. And I really made an effort to think about landscapes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, he sort of moved you more to broaden your genre choice.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He didn't suggest that. He said we were in the people mold.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And you didn't want to be in a mold? Or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I wanted to relook at drawings and not neglect that side of draftsmanship. I knew it was important.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he alerted me to the fact that I was—and Maida—that we were a little bit too heavy on people-oriented. Well, we did go out of our way, and we bought the Vrooms and various other landscapes. But you know, there were certain things we never warmed up to.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we made a deliberate decision not—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And what were those?

GEORGE ABRAMS: —to go into them heavily. The Italianate-Dutch. We liked the Dutch-Dutch.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, not Berchem, or Asselijn, or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Not until recent years, where we put the balance in there, too. [00:46:02]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, early on you were going for more what you liked, and you weren't thinking about a balanced—like, when do you feel like you—well, you made that original choice in the '60s, but when did you start thinking about your collection as a collection that needed to be filled in? Or as—well, we want to get into the legacy later, but, you know, you needed to get one of this artist, and that artist, and you didn't have the Italianates. I mean, was that sort of an evolution over time, because—

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, we were thinking, we bought what we wanted and liked, but then we had the exhibition in '69.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. So, that was a sort of seminal realization.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that made us think. And we also had the—Paul Sachs in the mid-'60s. And we began to think about—collection was clear, we were collectors.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: We were the only collectors, practically. There was nobody else collecting Dutch drawings in this country.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Did you like that aspect of your collecting, or—?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, it made it easier to collect top-level drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But the collecting of drawings, Old Master drawings, was not an American collecting area.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Still, even by the end of the '60s.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Even by the end of the '60s. It was really a European area.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And do you think you—you enjoyed, also, it sounds like, meeting all the people and the dealers and the auctions, and the whole world of the—was that sort of, also—

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was a European world. It was intellectual. It had nice people involved. And we loved it. I mean, we of course didn't spend a lot of time in the U.S. cultivating relationships, because we were in Europe so much, and we had involvements. [00:48:01] And I would—as a result of my Dutch involvements, I was approached by Sonesta International Hotels.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What year was that?

GEORGE ABRAMS: 1969.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I was approached to try and find a spot and work out a hotel for them in Amsterdam.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I finally found a place in '71, and I worked on getting the financing. I got the Dutch government, their development bank, to help. And then, I put together three Dutch banks to give us a mortgage. And Sonesta put in money. And we started building the hotel in '73 and '74, and it opened in '75.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, the whole first half of the '70s you were involved in that project, and going back and forth.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was going over a week a month for—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Very convenient for your— [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —it was terrific. It really gave us a great opportunity.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: How's your Dutch? That's my—

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was better then, but it wasn't very good.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I could understand quite a bit. I remember in the hotel project, we were looking for certain things from the city government, and the mayor was a man by the name of Ivo Samkalden, who was a nice man, burgemeester. And I remember his aide was sitting with him, and we were going to have a hearing. And he said in Dutch to his aide, "What are they looking for?"

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm [affirmative] [Laughs.].

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the aide said, "Well, they're looking for seven things. You've got a list there. We can give them the first six, but the seventh we can't." And the hearing started, and I said, "Mr. Burgermeister Burgemeester, we're looking for seven things but the most important is number seven." [00:50:08] And he turned to his aide and said, "*godverdomme*" ["God Damn" in Dutch].

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But it never was good, but the Dutch were always great about speaking English.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, right. I just wondered how, you know—it's a difficult language. So, now in the early '70s, your law practice, your work, and your passion have sort of converged, and it's a nice—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had come back from Washington, and I represented the Sonnabend family, which were the Hotel Sonesta group. And I was working on hotels for them, developing some. And the Amsterdam one was special. We found a great site. We built on the Arbeiderster press foundations. We bought the building from them, and we built on their foundations. And we restored 13th, 16th-century, 17th-century townhouses—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, wonderful.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —as part of the hotel complex. And the whole square—this is where that Lutheran round church is. And we went into a joint venture. We got the Dutch government, the province and the city, and we put in the money to restore the Lutheran Round Church to its 17th-century form. We made it into a concert hall, and we put in the eating facilities, and a conference hall.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: A win-win situation.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Ten years later, they awarded Sonesta their major award for having contributed the most to Amsterdam. And the previous winner, it was two winners—one was Ajax, when it won the world's championship in football—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. [00:52:05]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and the queen got it when she used the Lutheran church for her [. . . installation ceremony –GA]. And then she used that as the area for her [. . . coronation –GA].

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, here you have l an ideal situation with the law practice and the passion. Was there any time when they, you know, competed with each other? So that you couldn't spend as much time buying? I know, in Washington, you said. How about the other way around?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I always felt my law practice interfered with my life.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had things I needed to do and wanted to do. I had auction sales I wanted to go to, and oftentimes, I just couldn't do it. And I missed some drawings that way. But, you know, it allowed me to buy some drawings, too. Whatever I made in the law practice, I could put into drawings, and I did that. And I traveled a lot. I mean, a week a month in Europe was a good period, and I did that for seven years.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes, that's a lot.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, I had a week every other month, for another 14 years.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, did you have a sort of routine? You would get to Amsterdam, you stayed in a hotel near the dealer—I mean, where were your— [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's not that easy. [Laughs.] I would fly over to Europe. It was hard collecting from America. It's hard collecting, at that time, Old Master drawings. And the dealers in America—there were some, but their policies were to buy from other dealers and up the price by three times.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Because there's an ocean between, and people didn't know, then, exactly what things were selling for. [00:54:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you didn't like to buy over here?

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was hard over here, but I had friends over here, and Bob Light would help me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Bob Light.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And some of the other people occasionally. And sometimes there were things here. Occasionally, not often.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I would fly over, but I wouldn't fly to Amsterdam.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay. To London?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I'd stop in London, run around to dealers, and then fly out that night to Amsterdam.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. So that was the routine?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I would go over on a Sunday night, and I would spend Monday in London because we landed early. Monday night I would go to Amsterdam and do what I had to do. I would fly back Friday or Saturday. And then, I would do the same thing in Paris. Well, at that time, I had a lot of energy. And I could go full tilt from the time I got into Paris to the time I flew off to Amsterdam or London.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Were there just not as many dealers, or as much—I mean, London and Paris were big markets, but Amsterdam—what was the market like there in the early '70s?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Amsterdam had dealers. I was friendly with Lodewijk Houthakker.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was a great character. He had a combative personality, and he was quite funny in a lot of the things he did, but he wasn't easy. But I liked him a lot, and we were good friends. And I was friendly with Evert Douwes, and I knew him very well. And they all came and visited me. And we knew—we always went to the Delft Fair and saw the Nijstads. And [Hans] Kramer I was friendly with, and Hoogsteder.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Hoogsteder, mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE ABRAMS: I actually maintained pretty good relationships with the dealers, and they were good to me. [00:56:04] I don't have many complaints about dealers.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And was there ever one that you just didn't get along with? Or—you don't have to talk about it. [Laughs.] Or, you know—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I tried not to—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —tried to be friends with.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —have difficulty with anybody.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, that was an intelligent—

GEORGE ABRAMS: There were some I didn't buy from.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I didn't want to buy from. And I stopped dealing with Calmann, particularly. But there were many that were good friends and helped me. They went out of their way. Now, was I difficult as a buyer? I don't think so, but buyers aren't supposed to accept the price that a dealer asks, necessarily. And you have to size up the dealer and whether he's asking the price that he wants and isn't going to budge, or whether he wants to test you and do a little bargaining with you. But I always kind of asked, "What's the best price you can give me?"

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Which is not offensive. Or if I wanted to be really tough, "Would you take such-and-such?"

And they can say, "No, but I would take such and such."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, you mostly tried to do that with them.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I tried to get the best price I could, but I didn't try to over-push them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You didn't push it. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, I felt—see, and there are some collectors. I can think of one in Boston who started it well after I did. And he won't buy from dealers, because he can't stand the idea of a dealer making a profit off him. Well, I can stand the idea of a dealer making a profit. I just don't want him to make too much of a profit. [00:58:00] And, usually, they'll come to a reasonable area. Dealers are major supporters of the field.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The market, scholarship—they're collectors, often.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, dealers have a very important role in—particularly in Old Masters, because it's a field that you have to love, and it's not an easy-money field in any sense of the word.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No, no. Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, you know, in this country we didn't have many dealers. We had, in New York, Herbert Feist, who had a gallery on a corner around 85th Street, or [8]6th Street. He was working the lower edge, or middle edge of the market, had many number of drawings but they weren't, very often, especially interesting. We had Goldschmidt—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Goldschmidt, right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Lucien Goldschmidt was a very good dealer. He was smart, he did research, put out a little catalog.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Schab.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was a little on the expensive side at times, but not excessively so. We had [Frederick G.] Schab, who was—his father was a respected dealer, and Schab was a difficult dealer. And he was working the top end of the market, and the middle end. But some of the things weren't top-end or middle-end, and he wanted top-end and middle-end prices. And I did not find it easy to buy from Schab. I don't remember if I ever bought a drawing from him. [01:00:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But then we had Shatsky, who had—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Walter Shatsky. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —yes. He had a gallery. Now, you could make discoveries there at times, but he had things that were kind of worth looking at, and I tried to see them. And then, there was Wyeth, and he would have things. He was more a book dealer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he had shows occasionally. But he had good drawings sometimes. And once in a while, some of the other dealers—well, there was [Herman] Shickman, and Norman Lightman. And they were working the middle and upper end of the market. They were not easy, Shickman particularly.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Shickman would, every time I went in there, would lecture me on politics. And he was fairly right-wing, and he tried to convert me or something. Lightman was knowledgeable. He walked away from the business in his prime for reasons that I don't understand. But those dealers were not major figures in the field. Well, of course, there was Gene Thaw. Gene Thaw I knew—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, Gene Thaw. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, Gene Thaw I knew fairly well, because he was friendly with Bob Light, and I did several

transactions involving the two of them. But I never could relate to him very well.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No?

GEORGE ABRAMS: We weren't enemies, but we weren't friends. And he and Bob did a couple of good things together, and he was—he helped Bob on some matters, but he didn't like Dutch drawings very much.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No?

GEORGE ABRAMS: His interest was elsewhere. And, you know, in some ways, his collection—extraordinary that you can put a collection together of seven centuries of drawing [01:02:06] in this day and age, where it's hard. I gave a lecture once in which I said that I thought that was going to be a thing of the past. You have to concentrate on certain areas, because you couldn't fill in [over a seven century period –GA]with the artists you want, and with good examples. He did a good job. I mean, there were certain artists missing from his collection, but the artists he had, and has, were top artists, and very good examples. Some of them great.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Did you see the show?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I saw the show when I was—I knew his collection very well.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, sure.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But the show was beautiful. And it didn't surprise me that it was beautiful. But he collected all schools.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Now, in the Dutch area, he had 10 really good Dutch drawings. He had three or four Rembrandts which were good. He had a Jacob Ruisdael that he bought from the collection of that man in Larchmont. Nice man. What's his name?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, I'm thinking—

GEORGE ABRAMS: He taught at Vassar on the side.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No, I'm thinking there's a collector on the Upper East Side, too. It's a man—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I'll try to remember his name—Curtis Baer is his name.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, yes, Curtis Baer.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He bought the Ruisdael from Baer, which is a good drawing. He has a really good Saenredam, and he had a Jacques de Gheyn, which I'm a little shaky on, but is probably right. And if it's right, it's an important drawing. And for someone who didn't collect Dutch drawings, he's got some good examples.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did you know collectors like Alice Steiner—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I knew them very well. [00:02:00] I have a John Steiner—I have two John Steiner stories. Alice and John started in the '70s.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: They were collecting Dutch [and other –GA] schools, and I remember I gave a lecture at, I don't know, one of the museums—what was the name of that nice woman who was at the museum up on 80th Street or some place in there? Anyway, she was director there, and I gave a lecture there. And I got a little disconcerted because as I was showing things and talking about things, they were taking detailed notes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, the Steiners? [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And I was noticing that they were really taking all sorts of notes. And then, when I went to Amsterdam for a sale, they sat behind me, and they were bidding on things if I were bidding.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I didn't enjoy that. I had that happen at other times. And at one point, there was a drawing that came up, and I started bidding on it. And they started bidding. And I carried it to a point and stopped. And they ended up with it. Well, after the sale, they came up to me and said, "Well, we noticed you were bidding on that." It was a Herman Saftleven, *View on the Rhine*. "We noticed you were bidding on that

Herman Saftleven, and we actually bought it." And I said, "Well, I wasn't bidding for me. [00:04:00] I actually was bidding for a friend of mine who lived in that area, and he felt very nostalgic about it. I didn't want it for myself." Well, three weeks later, I got a letter from John Steiner that said, "Dear Mr. Abrams, we've been thinking about our Herman Saftleven drawing, and if your friend would like it for our cost, we would be willing to turn it over to him." I wrote him back and said, "My friend thought the price was crazy, and he isn't interested."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. You are a little competitive.

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I got mad because they were pushing me up on things I wanted.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, yes. Right. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they didn't have to do that. The other—no, but John Steiner, I got a couple of other stories about him. John Steiner always was trying to get a discount, and Lodewijk Houthakker was my friend, and we used to talk about it. And one day, John Steiner came into Lodewijk and wanted to buy a drawing, and Lodewijk said, "Yes, the price is such-and-such." And John said, "Is there any—can I buy it for less?" And Lodewijk said "No, I actually give museums or other dealers a 10 percent discount." And John said, "Well, I'm a dealer." And Lodewijk said, "Oh, you're a dealer?" "Yes." "Well, if you show me some proof," Lodewijk said. "I could give you a 10-percent." And John said, "I'll send you something."

And so, Lodewijk gets a letter from John that says, "John Steiner, Dealer." And he said, "Here's my stationery," and so forth. [00:06:01] And Lodewijk wrote him back and said, "No, that is not what I mean. What I mean, is do you have membership in any dealer organization? Would you send me a copy of membership?" And John sends him a copy of some garden club or something. And Lodewijk sends him a letter and said, "No, that doesn't—" So, they have a series of about 10 letters back and forth. Lodewijk keeping pushing him, pushing him, pushing him. And he would show me, he would say, "I got another letter from John Steiner, look at that!"

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, that was another John Steiner story.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But the—I had another situation with John Steiner, but I guess it slipped my mind.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: There's another—I mean, collector—he lived in the '90s, his name begins with E, and it just escapes me. I want to say Eugene, but that's Gene Thaw. Oh, well, I'll think about.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Where did he live?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Like in the '90s, on 5th Avenue?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Emile Wolf.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That's it, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I knew Emile very well.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I know all these people.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Emile and I were friends, sort of. Emile I think of as a great character. Emile would wake up every morning, and he would jump out of bed and say, "Today I make a discovery."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes [Laughs.].

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he would go all through Manhattan and all those streets, and he would come back at night, and he said, "I found a Rubens!" And he would have that drawing. And I'm convinced that's what made him a happy man, you know. All his discoveries. But then, people would come, and his discoveries wouldn't always [hold –GA] up. There's some of his drawings his family is selling in these sales.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I remember he used to invite me to dinner sometimes. [00:08:00] And he had a wonderful cook who worked for him and cleaned and took care of him. And she was Hungarian. He was Hungarian. She made Hungarian goulash and they had wonderful foods. And one day, he invited me for dinner. He said he has Horst Gerson there. And they're going to look at—he's going to show him some drawings. So, I went there, and Mrs. [Kate] Schaeffer was there. Nice lady.

And we were there, and Horst Gerson was there, and Emile was there. And his Hungarian cook made this great meal, and we had Hungarian wines. And then, Emile went out and came back with a drawing and put it under Gerson's nose, and said, "Rembrandt!" And Gerson said, "18th century." So, Emile goes out again, and he comes back, and he shows him. "Rembrandt!" And Gerson said, "Copy." And he goes out once more and he comes back, and he says, "Rembrandt." And Gerson says, "20th century."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, dear. Getting worse.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, Emile looks around the room, he says, "Okay, everybody, time to go. Time to go." So we all got up, and Gerson goes out, and Mrs. Schaeffer goes out, and I'm going out. And Emile says to me, "What a wasted meal that was."

[They laugh.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I love that.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But Emile and I had a couple of clashes. Emile did an exhibition at Cornell, and they did a really not-very-good catalog on it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, I think I remember that.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was printed on bad paper and everything. As usual, Emile always tried to get the top name. He didn't have too many of the top name, but he had some of the others. [00:10:03] He sent me a copy of the catalog, and I wrote him back, and I said, "Dear Emile, I really like the Pieter de Molijn, and I thought the Withoos was really fine. They're lovely drawings. Thank you for sending me the catalog." And he sent me back a letter that says, "So, you didn't like my catalog."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, he says, "Well, I want you to know that you have the best Dutch collection in Newton, Massachusetts."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: "And I know your great hero—" and then he used a word, a European word, you know, somebody you worship, "—is Cornelis Dusart, but I wouldn't have him in my collection."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: He had to get you back somehow. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I wrote him back, and I said, "Emile, I got you mad at me. You don't have to do that, it's okay. We don't have to worry about getting mad." And then, he never said anything about that again. We continued on.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Still friends.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, so, we got to the mid-'70s. And so, now how was the market—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, we haven't really.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —changing? Well, not really, we were in the—okay, we can start—we can go through the '70s, we haven't really done that. Okay, you're buying in Holland—no, you're buying in London and Paris, not so much in Amsterdam.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, from Douwes and Houthakker, I did buy.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There was another dealer—kind of an interesting guy by the name of Gerard Meyers. You won't know of him. Most people won't.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-mm. [Negative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was kind of a runner. He's still [. . . around –GA]. He's an inside dealer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But he's, in some ways, loveable, but not reputable. [00:12:06]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he used to do things, like, he would buy from Houthakker, and then walk down the same street and sell to Douwes what he bought. Because neither of them would go into the other person's gallery—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Each other's store, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and even vice versa. And he formed some collections. He formed a collection for that man in Amsterdam who got into financial trouble because of tax situations.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Had the library and works of art.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I know this is ringing bells, but not—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, I'll remember that eventually. And also, for his assistant, who formed a Dutch collection which was shown at the Rijksmuseum. Was pretty good, not top-level. But Meyer really found a lot of drawings for them. [Reitman was the name of the Amsterdam collector. Very good things. Glass, library, drawings, painting, mostly had to be sold at auction—except for the library. His assistant's name was Jacob Klauer. His drawing collection was pretty good—sold at auction in Amsterdam in the 1990s.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: M-E-Y-E-R?

GEORGE ABRAMS: M-E-Y-E-R.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he found some drawings. He went everywhere, and he would turn things up. And I got some things from him. I remember I had to go—sometimes, he lived for a while two hours outside of Amsterdam, and I used to go see him. But then, he moved to Amsterdam, and he was a restorer in Rotterdam. But gave that up. And he did other things, but the museum people would deal with him, but they wouldn't admit it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. So, it was a little shady.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, he was complicated.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But a character. And he knew a lot, and he still does.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Okay. [00:14:00] And so, these are the people you're around—why does this say 14 minutes? You know what, I'm going to—wait, let me just start here. Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There was another Dutch collector who bought drawings related to paintings, and he did a show at the Rijksmuseum. So, there were some collectors in Europe. Not so much in England. One collector in France, who I didn't know who he was—Paul Russell, started collecting in Amsterdam.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: In the '70s?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No. It must have been even a little later. Late '70.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Adolphe Stein, he was a dealer in Paris.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Adolphe Stein was a dealer I knew very well, and I bought some very good things from Adolphe Stein. He's one person, when I would fly into Amsterdam, I would stop in Paris and go visit him.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I would see him in London, he had shows in London regularly. He was a nice man. He

knew a lot. He was married to an American woman, I think. And I remember, I flew in one of those days when I was going to Amsterdam. Landed in Paris, went to see him. And I said, "What you got?" And he said, "Well, I bought something really good at Drouot last week." And I said, "What was that?" He said, "It's a really good de Gheyn." I said, "Well, let me see it."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he said, "Well, it's at the restorer's right now and they're framing it." And I looked at my watch, and I thought about having to go to Amsterdam, and I was tired and everything. [00:16:02] And I said, "Can we go see it?" He said, okay. So, we went, and there was a drawing of a Gypsy mother and child. And it was really beautiful—by de Gheyn. And the mother was holding the child's finger.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: You could see that, and the relationship was one of great love with her, and the child was obviously struggling with his life, I guess. And I said, "That's a good drawing." He said, "Yes, I bought it last week." I said, "I want to buy it." And he said, "Well, I want to make a profit." And I said, "That's okay." And he said, okay, and he gave me a price. And I looked at it and I said, "Okay, I'm going to buy it." And I did. And he let me take it off of him.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You took it right away from the restorers?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yep.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You didn't even get it finished restoring? Just took it Amsterdam?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Didn't need anything. And I remember, we had experiences like that. I have other drawings—I have two early van Goyens that are beautiful that I bought from him.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, when you're traveling—now, you're going back to Amsterdam, and then, you have to come back here, and you have these drawings. Are they, like, stuck in your portfolio, or are some of them are framed?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Depending on the circumstances, I declare them or not, and say that I bought them there.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And they would come—I mean, what if they were framed? Do you generally get them unframed? Mostly—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Most of them were unframed.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, it's fairly easy to carry them around because they're sheets.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, and sometimes they had to ship them to me, you know. [00:18:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I remember once, another person I dealt with a lot in Paris was de Bayser. Bruno was a lovely guy, he and his wife is, and he's got 11 kids or something like that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Like Vermeer.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And I liked him a lot. I liked her a lot, they were very decent. And I can remember he called me one day and said one of his daughters needs to buy an apartment, so he's willing to give up a Dusart he's got, which was quite special. And, do I want to come in and see it. And I said, yes, and I got that big five-person Dusart from great collections. Signed, dated. I was interested in that drawing, because I had seen a copy of it a few years earlier at Douwes. And both of them, according to Susan Anderson, who's a Dusart person, are by Dusart. The first one, which is signed and dated, and I bought from Bruno, is the original. And the second one was something he did as a replica.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you bought that early Dusart that you were explaining earlier, the little figure, which is neither man nor woman.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's probably a man.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: How did you became a—it sounds like you did sort of become a Dusart—the Dusart person.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I think I am the Dusart person, except—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You also have Susan working for you. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —my curator, Susan Anderson—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —wrote her PhD thesis on Dusart.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. No, I know, but—

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that's how we got to meet.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. But it sounds like you had already been quite a Dusart collector before that.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, no, and I had—people were ignoring Dusart up to that point, but I found him to be an artist I liked. [00:20:05] And he was fun, and he had a sense of humor. And the more I found out about him, he was very interesting. He had an important library. And he had relatives, and some of them were educators and musicians. And he had an interesting life. One thing I found out, which surprised me, was that he did a number of drawings and book illustrations that were anti-Catholic. And he was pretty tough at times, but that's not his personality. His personality is one of humor and seeing people, and where he's especially interesting is the large figure drawings in color which Ostade never did. So, that was original work by him, and they're quite special. But they're rare. I'm lucky that I got several. But the Rijksmuseum has two beautiful ones, and the Boijmans has two, and they're quite special. I like him as an artist.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I don't like some of his things; he can be too caricature. But I do like him. And I found other artists like that who I liked and other people may not.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Is there an artist you would say is your favorite artist? You know, or do you have different genres, like, you know—do you have one artist for each genre or is it—yesyou know.

GEORGE ABRAMS: You know, in my collection, I really think of in terms of five centers of interests.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Maybe my favorite center of interest is Rembrandt and all his students.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And there I have wonderful drawings by Rembrandt students. I have Jan Lievens' drawings. I have six of them that are so beautiful. Landscapes and heads, and the landscapes are exceptional. I do love those. [00:22:00] And then, Arent de Gelder, I have the only sure drawing by him. And all down the line. Furnerius—the one from Winslow Ames. I have a really good group of Rembrandt students and Rembrandt drawings. So, there's about 90 in that group.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I do love that area. The genre drawings—I have a beautiful Ostade and Dusarts, but then the watercolor still lifes, I mean, they're—Jacob Marrel does tulips that are so beautiful, and Maria Sibylla Merian can do wonderful watercolor sheets, so that you get other people. The Vrooms are special. We just did an exhibition at Harvard of early Dutch drawings; 1590 to 1630. And there were 31 drawings in that group. I actually have about 75 in my collection. That's such a beautiful group of draftsmen.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Cornelis—well, if you start Goltzius and de Gheyn, and you to go to—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Van de Velde, Esaias van de Velde.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —all those early, Esaias van de Velde and Jan van de Velde, and David Vinckboons, and David Bailly, and Jan Pynas. They're wonderful artists, and they were just breaking away from the restrictions of the Catholic Church and doing the most beautiful drawings of that period. But you know, I've got these interests, and I have got my point of view. Not many other people are interested, or they don't want to put the time in to think about those things.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, it's been a lot of time and effort, and research, and reading and talking to a lot of people. I mean, you've put a tremendous—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, and will that be valid, or will that be of interest to people 50 years from now? I don't know. [00:24:03]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Does that bother you? I mean, do you care?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I would like people to realize how special this material is.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh, I think it's going to go with the last section, which we'll do a little later.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yep.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, let's just stick with the '70s, if we can. Because, I mean, the big thing that happened is the Chatsworth sale—

GEORGE ABRAMS: '80s.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: In the '80s [Laughs.]. So, are we done with the '70s, do you think? I mean, how would you characterize your collecting, I guess, in the '70s? The '60s, you're learning, you're meeting.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It's early times, it's cheap, it's exciting.

GEORGE ABRAMS: In the '70s, I began adding some really wonderful drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Noel Annesley said at a lecture that I was consistently buying the Dutch drawings he felt were the best. The Getty wasn't in the picture. There wasn't a lot of real top competition.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. So, you were still getting good sheet—

GEORGE ABRAMS: [Ian] Woodner wasn't around—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Woodner wasn't around yet, right?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: He didn't really start until the '80s, right? I mean, I guess.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I knew him when he started in the '60s and '70s. We were friends.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He had a bad collection in the beginning, and then he really began to collect well. And then, he was buying the top of the market. He used to make me sit with him and he'd make me discuss drawings with him, so he didn't think about what he might want to buy.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I had a lot of funny incidents with Ian. But no, I didn't have a lot of competition in that period. And I bought beautiful things. And that was when I bought a lot of drawings from J. A. van Dongen—Dr. van Dongen in Amsterdam, and from Dr. C. R. Rudolf. [00:26:02] And I really got into beautiful things there. Bob Light was—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did you buy directly from Rudolf then, or—when did he die?

GEORGE ABRAMS: He died, must have been mid-'70s.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Like '75, I feel like?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, some of them. And he had another person who worked with him, and he was buying things in a different area—in a modern area.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he wanted to keep buying. But he was a nice man. I tell a story about—we went to visit him in 19—maybe in late '60s, early '70s—maybe '72, '73. And he lived in a five-floor walkup in Golders Green. And I remember it was the middle of winter, we were in London—Maida and I—and it was freezing cold. And we went up to visit him. You had to walk up to the fifth floor. And we knocked on the door, and he opened. He was wearing an English suit with a vest—heavy stuff.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Tweed. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Tweed, yes. And with lots of stuff. And he had his windows open, it was freezing. It was so cold. And poor Maida, her teeth were chattering. And so, we went in and looked at things, and it was a sparse apartment. It had a kitchen with a stove. It had a large room next to it, where he had drawings and drawing boxes. And a room on the other side, which was a bedroom, where he had other drawing boxes. And he showed us things, and we really—they were really good, but we were freezing. [00:28:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Even drawings couldn't keep you warm.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Finally, we left, and as we were leaving—I'm about to walk out, and Maida tugs at my arm, and she says, "Look." And I looked in the sink, and there was a glass of water, frozen solid.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, my God. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was that cold. Well, we used to visit him in the spring and summer after that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That was a good idea. He was a tough Englishman.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, well, maybe we're done with the '70s, and we can talk tomorrow with the Chatsworth sale. That might be a sort of—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Sure.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —so, maybe it's a sort of turning point for drawings, and the drawings market.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I didn't tell you much about Dr. van Dongen—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No, no, we haven't—we have a few more minutes here.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There was a lovely man. He was a major doctor in Amsterdam, a urologist and a surgeon. And he used to buy large numbers of drawings. He used to go to Paul Brandt's auctions.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, Paul Brandt, right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I can tell you all about him, too. He would go to Paul Brandt auctions, and he would sit there, and he would buy. And he had, let's say, 1,200 drawings, which he put into one category, and another 500 in another. And I went and visited him, and he said to me, "You know, I'm older now." He was in his 80s, mid-80s. He said, "I'd like to find a good home for some of my drawings." And I said, "Well, I think we're a good home, and I would like to see if there's some things we can do." And so, we bought maybe 50 drawings from him.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wow. And what year was this?

GEORGE ABRAMS: '82, maybe, '81.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, this is '82 already, okay. [00:30:02]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Or '78—no, maybe '80. And he had had an exhibition in the Willet-Holthuysen Museum, and on the cover was a de Gheyn of a young boy, three head studies. And I bought that from him, and I bought another drawing of a standing man, which was supposed to be Dusart, but it wasn't. And then, it turned out that Peter Schatborn had figured out that it was the only Lambert Doomer drawing like that related to a painting.

And when Peter retired, I gave it to the Rijksmuseum in his honor. But at that point, it had become worth a lot of money. And I couldn't get a deduction from the Rijksmuseum, because they weren't an American charity. But I gave it—just, he discovered it, and that's the right place for it. But it's an important drawing in the Rembrandt circle now. And then, I remember taking home four or five drawings at a time, and they were good. And some of them were just pretty good, but that's hard to find, too. I took home five bird and animal and fish drawings. I still

have all of them, they're beautiful.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And so, Dr. van Dongen was a lovely guy. I remember I bought some drawings from him, and then, the dollar got worse from the—against the guilder, and he wrote me, and said, "You know, I was thinking that when you bought them it would be a certain amount, but the dollar has gotten so much weaker against the guilder." And so, I wrote back, and I said, "You know, you're right, and I feel badly that that's happened, and I want to give you some extra money. [00:32:07] Why don't we revalue that, and I'll send you additional money?" And we did. And I sent him some more.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, how about—when did buy your first Rembrandt drawing? And what was that like? I know you've said that you didn't think initially that you would be able to buy Rembrandts, but—

GEORGE ABRAMS: When we did that show at Wellesley and that catalog, I was interviewed by the *Hartford Courant*, and the art person there, a woman, said, "Well, you don't have any Rembrandts." And I said, "Well, Rembrandt is perhaps a little beyond our means. And I like buying artists—"

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, this is '68, '69 now. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. "I like buying artists, and I'm afraid if I put the type of money I need into Rembrandt, it would cut out my buying other people for a period of time, and I'm not sure I want to do that. So, we may never do that and spend this sort of money that's necessary, because it will stop us from other areas."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But then, I saw Rudolf one day, and he said he had bought a Rembrandt—traded for a Rembrandt that Lugt had, and would I want to buy it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Frits Lugt.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And would I be interested in that. And I said, "Yes, but, you know, I don't know whether I can handle it." But he gave a price, which I thought was doable. And I thought about it and thought about it and finally, I said, "Okay, it's a deal." And I bought it. [00:34:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. And that was which one?

GEORGE ABRAMS: That was the first. That was one that I've given to Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: We're not sure whether it's *Abraham and the Angel*, or *Zacharias and the Angel*.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then—well, he was—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did that put a little bug in you for Rembrandt, then? You were like, "Huh."

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, I always had a bug for Rembrandts, I just didn't have the—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The dough.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —opportunities and the money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But then—you know, at some stage, I just said, you know, that Rembrandt is so special. I could have bought Rembrandts for five and ten thousand dollars that are worth three, four million dollars today. But it just was hard, and the more likely price was 30,000.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I kept looking, and I did try to buy at the sale of—the [Robert van] Hirsch sale—I tried to

buy a drawing in charcoal, or whatever that substance is that Rembrandt uses. And it was of three people ice skating.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I underbid it. It was bought by Frau Muthman at Boerner. I tried to buy it from her afterwards, but she sold it quickly to Richard Day. And he sold it to Robert Noortman. And Noortman reported it stolen from the RAI [Amsterdam]where he was exhibiting. And it's never been recovered.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wow. That's a terrible story. [00:36:02]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I think about that drawing. I should have bought it. But, interesting: I had gotten a call shortly before that sale from a well-known, respected judge in Massachusetts—Judge Charles Wyzanski. Who was head of the Harvard Corporation—a federal court judge. I knew him. And he told me a story. He said, "Do you know I have a Rembrandt drawing? It's a nice drawing. I bought it from Colnaghi a few years ago."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: "I went in. I subsequently found Colnaghi," he told me. He said, "I bought it, and I have it here, and I like it. But the house next door to me yesterday was robbed, and I'm thinking I really can't handle the responsibility."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: "Would you like to buy the drawing?" And I said, "You know, I'm going to Europe tonight for a sale, but I'll be back in a week. And let me come over, and we'll look at it." He said, fine. And that one—I missed out on that drawing in the Hirsch sale.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, and then you came back, and you got the Wyzanski.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he—I went over and looked, and it was much better than the—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The one in the Hirsch sale.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —yes, it's the one with the old man with the cane.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, oh, I love that. Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And he said, "Well"—he had gone into Colnaghi, and he was looking for either a Leonardo or a Raphael or Michelangelo. And he asked if they had any, and they said no, but they had a Rembrandt. And they showed him this Rembrandt, and he said okay, and he bought it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But he said he was worried about the security, and the theft.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "Well, what do you want?" And he said a price, he said, "This is what I paid. This is the insurance, and this is reasonable interest. [00:38:00] And that's what I want." And I said, "Can I pay you over a period of time?" And he said, "Absolutely." So, I bought it. And I was thrilled to get it, you know, but it happened in that whole sequence.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That whole same thing with the Hirsch sale.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And that was a really beautiful drawing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And that—so these were in the '70s, too? Both of them?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, that was probably in the '70s. I'll have to see when the Hirsch sale was.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: All right. I'm going to—was there anything more about the '70s that you want to say now, because it's sort of—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, there are some other people. If I thought enough, there would be some other people that we could be talking about.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, maybe if it comes up tonight. I'll turn this off for now.

[Audio break.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, it's a day later. And in thinking over yesterday, I thought I would like to summarize some of the things I was trying to say and pull it together in a short summary. Because I interfered with the train of thoughts by telling too many stories.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I want to emphasize that the collecting of Old Master drawings was a European activity, and not much in America. We have some history. And I've written on this subject, the history of collecting Old Master drawings in America. But it's sparse until the 20th century. I mentioned yesterday some of it—we had the painter John Smibert, who came to this country in the 18th century late and was a collector of Old Master drawings. And his collection was bought by James Bowdoin, and given to Bowdoin College. And Bowdoin now has a tradition that's gone on for a long time of being interested in drawings—Old Master, and now modern—and having exhibitions.

And that was one area that has really come more to the fore in the 20th century. We had Vanderbilt at the Met, but that wasn't a very good collection—not much that's held up very well. But then you got later collectors at the Met. And Roger Fry was there in 1910, in that period, and had an influence on drawing collecting. I remember some in the Dutch area, he bought one or two beautiful Cuyps and other things, and wrote, and then went back to England.

And you had some collectors in and around the Met. [00:01:57] Walter Baker comes to mind, a wonderful collection, wonderful drawings. Jacob Bean was a curator there, and he was a major influence. But in the Dutch area, he didn't like Dutch drawings. And he collected odd ones whenever he did, which was not very much. It was great because he didn't compete, and he was off in another world. And I was happy with that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Irving was there in France, and he had some drawings. But by and large in the Dutch area, the Met was not involved. In other areas they began to build a few collectors, but it wasn't a major emphasis. We had the Morgan. Morgan bought the Fairfax Murray collection, which had some very good high points, and was a good collection, and came intact about 1909, 1910. But it was quiet after that, and relied on the Fairfax Murray group. I was looking at some of their Van Dycks, and Rubens, and Jordaens, and a lot of them come from Fairfax Murray and other people. So, that was a group not active in the period immediately after they were acquired. But subsequently very active, and more active right now.

We have Pratt at Princeton, who collected some drawings and started the Princeton collection. And they've got a collection that's active. And Yale had the good fortune to get the sketchbook that was full of drawings—some good, some later written and developed by Begemann. [00:04:00] Yale had some tradition of collecting Old Master drawings, but not as much as you'd think. It really relied on the past, the major drawings that it had acquired in the sketchbook.

Los Angeles got active in the 20th century. And there was a woman out there who organized a conference on Old Master drawings in about 1972, and put out a major catalog. And that was a big kind of emphasis. Everybody got together. There were conferences. It was three days. And that was a boost to the field, which had been quiet until that period. Harvard, of course, had Paul Sachs, and that was the great force and interest in Old Master drawings in this country.

He came to Harvard in 1915, 1914, and Agnes Mongan was his assistant. And she did great work in French drawings. And she had three students she particularly worked with, who became major figures in the French drawing field—Meg Morgan Grasselli at the National Gallery, Beverly Schreiber. Meg Morgan—[Margaret] Morgan Grasselli was the Watteau person, and she wrote the material on Watteau. And Beverly Schreiber became the Fragonard person, and she wrote material on that. And Eunice Williams—Eunice Williams—became the Boucher person, and she worked in that area. And that expanded the interest in French drawings.

[00:06:00] Enormously—and this was all out of Harvard. And Harvard also had a number of other people. Jakob Rosenberg came from Germany, and he was curator of prints there eventually, and drawings. And he worked in drawings, he knew drawings and loved them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did you know Jakob Rosenberg?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was his lawyer and friend, and we used to have Sunday brunch together about every two weeks.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I got to know him very well, and he was a lovely man. We used to call him at Harvard the "Heilige Jakob." He was so wonderful. And good with students and people in the field. Seymour Slive was there. [. . . He worked on Rembrandt, and Frans Hals, and Jacob Ruisdael –GA]—and paintings and drawings. And he wrote a Rembrandt drawing book that was [. . . published recently –GA].

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and the Getty published it. And it's a wonderful book. He was 91, I think, when he wrote it. And it's quite special. But then there was Jim Ackerman, who wrote on architectural drawings, Italian works, and was the expert on Palladio. Other people, and Sydney Freedberg, who did a lot of work on drawings and paintings—and in Italian, in particular. And Konrad Oberhuber was there, and he knew Flemish, and he knew German, and he knew Dutch, and other areas. And he influenced many students because of his personality, both at Harvard then around the country. He was at the National Gallery for a period and then went to the Albertina, became director there, but—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did any of those people influence you at all? Jakob Rosenberg, or Slive, or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was friendly with all of them. I—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: But did they, you know—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was Konrad Oberhuber's lawyer too. [00:08:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I handled also some things for Konrad. Konrad was kind of a free soul. He was not the most practical person in the world, and he believed in a seven-year cycle. Which I never quite understood, but he—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Steinerism.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —lectured on it periodically. But he was a warm, lovely, happy personality. And people gravitated to him. And the collectors—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you didn't, like, sort of get advice from him at all. You just—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I found my—Maida and I did best when we worked on our own.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: We got to know these people, we talked with them, they listened to us. But we were in the Dutch area, and some of them were—a few of them were in the Dutch area. Most of them weren't. But they had concepts and ideas about drawings, and people, and history. And we absorbed all that. And Bill Robinson I did work closely with—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. I wanted to talk about—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and Frank Robinson.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —Bill Robinson a bit with you.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Franklin Robinson. And we—Franklin and I were discovering things together, in the early stages, that were artists people didn't know in the United States. And we found them. I found drawings and he would work on them, and I would work on them. And we were building knowledge in that period. And these are all centered in Harvard. And currently, Harvard has curators named after Maida and me—Edouard Kopp. And he's a very likeable person who the students are gravitating to again. And he works in the French area but we're teaching him a little bit about Dutch.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He's young, and we're developing students around him. [00:09:56] And last year and the year before, he took six or seven graduate students each year to the Salon du dessin in Paris. We developed some money for him to do that, and he liked doing that. Now, all of these people used to bring students around. Seymour Slive would bring students, Frank Robinson all the time would try to have them look at drawings. And Konrad Oberhuber and I taught a course in Old Master drawings, half of which was in my living room, for graduate students. And some of the undergraduates snuck into the course.

And it had about 12 people in the course, and a lot of them ended up as directors of a museum. The director of the Getty for a period of time was somebody who was in the course, and others. But in addition to Harvard and the people they created there were other people, a few, collecting Old Master drawings in the 20th century. There was a nice man in Kansas City by the name of [Milton] McGreevy, who collected Old Master drawings and gave many of them to Kansas City.

And in Seattle we had LeRoy Backus, who collected drawings, Dutch drawings. McGreevy collected some Dutch, too. And Backus left his drawings to the Crocker. And they have—I think the Crocker. And he had his own setup for a period of time. And there were people in New York, a few. Walter Liedtke, who was the curator of Dutch art, died tragically four years ago. At a conference where he and I spoke—[. . . he –GA] talked about Dutch art being centered in New York. [00:12:07]

Well, that wasn't right for drawings, and it even wasn't right for paintings all the way. But people like Frick, of course, and some of the other—Morgan—and some of the other great collectors were New York-centered. But there were centers all over. There was a good collector in Cincinnati, and a good collector in Cleveland. They stand out because they were the only ones doing it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they had an influence on people around them. There weren't exhibitions going on very much. The Rijksmuseum did one. Harvard did a Rembrandt exhibition where a good many of the drawings were actually by Rembrandt, and some of them weren't. But that was an important exhibition. The Rijksmuseum genre exhibition went to two or three museums. But the real exhibition catalogs started with Frank Robinson and my collection in the Dutch area.

And this started with the Wellesley one that went to six museums, and then went on to a Clark Institute [catalogue –GA] that Frank did when he was director of the Clark Institute, where we had a group of students work on 25 drawings that had never been exhibited before. And then, we were asked by the National Gallery to do an exhibition. And Frank put together 90 drawings from American collections, from mostly museums, and my collection. I put a rule in that nothing that had been exhibited before was going in that exhibition. But I had 38 drawings of the 90 in that exhibition in the National Gallery.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: What year was that?

GEORGE ABRAMS: That was in 1976.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: '76. [00:14:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we excluded all the ones that had been in Wellesley and Clark, and some of the other exhibitions. But those catalogs were having an impact. And we would go into the cities, and sometimes there would be interviews by the art columnist. And we would talk about it and people would come, and I would see people who were getting interested. And some of them would begin collecting, a few of them. And then, we really saw a—not surge, but still, it was a quiet, nice field. It had lawyers and doctors and teachers and educators.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, when do you—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Hardly any moguls.

[They laugh.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No. So, really it didn't get going until the '80s then, I mean, in a way. And then—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, it was going in a wonderful way in the '60s and '70s.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —it was going in a nice, sort of quiet way. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was intellectual and scholarly, and there were books. And if you built a library, you could have a wonderful time. But it was European-oriented.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And there were European dealers. The American dealers were a handful, I mentioned some of them yesterday.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There was Swetzoff in Boston—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. I wrote them all down here. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —who wasn't a drawing dealer. And there was Light in Boston who was an important dealer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Feist in New York, who was not an important dealer, but active and with many drawings. And Wyeth in New York. And there was an early drawing dealer by the name of [Richard] Ederheimer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Eder who?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Ederheimer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Ederheimer.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he had an influence. He did exhibitions, and he showed drawings, and he made one or two catalogs. And Paul Sachs used to bring students down to New York, and they would look at Ederheimer's drawings. [00:16:00] I didn't feel he really liked Ederheimer too much for some reason.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But he brought the students there. And I've got the catalogs, and I've even got a couple of drawings that were in there. But he was in New York, very early person in it. And new to the European circuit, so he had perhaps better things. And there was Shatsky, who had many drawings, and it was worth going through. And you could find things there once in a while. And there were a group of people that did, but this was still in the period when they were professors and educators and lawyers and people like that, and not investing a great deal of money. And you had Mrs. Drey, who was a European-oriented dealer. And she had drawings, and she was dealing with museums and major collectors. And, occasionally, she had really good things. And she was quite active. She would go to Europe and bring things back. And then, there was Hanns Schaeffer and his wife, who were active in paintings and other works of art, they had a deep European background. And they were dealing in drawings, and they would have not many really good paintings, but often very good drawings. And they knew a lot, Hanns knew a great deal.

There was another woman who was active, and had exhibitions, and did catalogs. Helene Muensterberger. Helene Muensterberger was a serious drawing dealer, and she did know the European field. And she did exhibitions, and was influential in creating a few collectors. [00:17:54] Her husband was a psychiatrist and wrote a book on collecting in which he, as I read the book, took a very negative attitude, and said it was a serious psychotic head problem, and a sickness, and so forth. But she didn't agree. She liked collecting, and I think that caused some rift. But in any case, she was a dealer who was around. And then, there was this lovely Dutchman by the name of Louis de Wild. And Louis de Wild—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I think you mentioned him yesterday.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —was a restorer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he had restored a lot of the Widener paintings in the National Gallery. And he did the work for Knoedler's, and Wildenstein, and was a Dutchman who had come to America, and had a history of family that were restorers and artists. And Louis was very interested in Dutch drawings and helped two main collectors in the New York area to collect Dutch drawings. One was a man by the name of Kramer. And he built a lovely collection, important. And a second man Louis helped—those were two good collections. I mentioned earlier yesterday, Curtis Baer, who was a serious collector, a serious scholar. And taught at Vassar, and did exhibitions. I remember when he came to my house, he was trying to do a landscape show of Dutch drawings. But he—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That was early.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —yes, 1972.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Late '60s—oh, '72? Okay. Anyway, Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Or, you know, about '70 or '72. And Curtis had given up, he thought, on doing the landscape exhibition. [00:19:58] And then, he came over to the house for the first time, and he got excited because I had a lot of interesting drawings, as far as he was concerned, for landscape. And he brought a very good Vassar

scholar, Susan Donahue Kuretsky.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Susan was knowledgeable, and she was able to help him. And they did an exhibition with a lovely catalog on Dutch landscape drawings and prints, with a little separate section with about seven Cuyps. They had Rembrandts in there, and it was a lovely exhibition. And he was teaching courses. And Susan picked up on it, she continued at Vassar doing those things. So, those were the quiet sort of activities. People who did best were those who realized the opportunities in Europe, and did pick up material from Europe.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You sort of have glossed over Felice Stampfle. Do you feel like she didn't have—just because, you know.

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, she had a major impact.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I didn't mention also a couple of other people who had impacts. Elizabeth Morgan was at Smith. It was Elizabeth Mongan. This was Agnes Mongan's sister.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And she was at Smith College, she was curator there. And she did a lot of work on drawings and encouraged some Smith people, and started acquiring for the Smith College Museum some drawings. Felice Stampfle was of great importance. She was at the Morgan. She was a good scholar. [00:21:58] She helped revive Master Drawings, was an editor, and had some shows at the Morgan. And—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The periodical—yes, with the Lugt collection, and the Rijksmuseum, and—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yup.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And she was deeply involved in the field for many years. But again, there's a picture of Paul Sachs. And in that picture, there's a group of students in his museum course. And if you look hard you can see there's Agnes Mongan, and there's Elizabeth Mongan, and there's Felice Stampfle.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And you go right down the list. He had some 400 students they've recorded. And there's a book coming out on him later this year. Four hundred students who became curators and active in American museums over a period of time.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Great.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Harvard has a record of those students, and it's amazing when you see how much impact he had. But we talked about European dealers yesterday, and I just wanted to cover that a little better. Sotheby's and Christie's in the '60s, early '60s, started having more elaborate drawing sales. They had had them over the years always. There was a great tradition of sales. But they weren't handled as elaborate matters. They were largely unillustrated, and it was a market they made. And the quiet collecting was going on in Europe among, again, the scholarly group of collectors in the tradition that Frits Lugt's books on a collector's marks illustrates.

And each collector had a certain personality, and Lugt writes about them under the collector's marks book that came out in 1926. [00:23:58] And he had in there some 3,000 collectors over the period from the 1600s, or 1500s even. But the 1600s through the early 20th century—up through 1920.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And there was a real kind of quiet, scholarly market and excitement among a select group of people, rather private. But the dealers [. . . made –GA] the market up to that point, it wasn't Sotheby's or Christie's. That started to change in the '60s—Richard Day at Sotheby's, and Noel Annesley came to Christie's.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Christie's. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But there were dealers all over London, particularly. Yvonne French was a woman who had very good taste. And people would visit her and then find drawings. And Hans Calmann was a—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, you talked about him yesterday.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —imperious force.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But he was active and important. And Colnaghi started doing, and had for some period of time, major work in drawings. So, they had two or three important [collectors –GA]—and dealers involved with them, one of them was a dealer by the name of Baskett who people liked, and helped form.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Didn't Day and Baskett go together for a while? [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was his father who—it was Day and Baskett, after Richard Day left Sotheby's in the mid-'60s, set up. And John Baskett was a very good dealer, and helped Mellon with his English material, particularly in the Mellon Museum. A lot of activities. But his father had been at Colnaghi and helped Rudolf start, and was an advisor to Rudolf. [00:25:57] And then, there were other Christie's people. Christopher White was at Colnaghi's for a period of time in the '40s. Great scholar on Rembrandt and others, and prints, and generally a major influence in England. And then, there were a whole group of other people. There was a man by the name of John Hardy who was a shipping person, retired, and began dealing in Old Master drawings. And he would travel the world and visit people. He was dealing with middle level drawings, but he was a charming personality, you know.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Were these Dutch and Flemish, or just Old Masters in general?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Old Masters, but a lot of Dutch and Flemish.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Which was—it was fun when he came by. You couldn't tell what you would see, and you'd—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Did he bring the drawings to you? To, like—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And sometimes I would see him in London. There was a wonderful dealer, who fled Germany, by the name of Herbert Bier.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And his wife was also knowledgeable, and [she –GA] went on after Herbert died as a dealer. And there was the Sharfs. Alfred Sharf. Alfred fled Germany. And his wife and Alfred dealt in drawings, she particularly. He was a scholar of Fra Angelico and others. He wrote on it, she dealt with drawings, and they had good things, and some knowledge. So, you can see that the market there was dealer-oriented, and they were nice people. They weren't getting rich, most of them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, if they're all dealing with each other, how did they make any money? [Laughs.] If there's not—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I don't know whether dealers were making a lot of money in those days. I think they probably weren't.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But they loved doing it. [00:28:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they were collectors too.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: They were collectors too, right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And, you know, there were—more than you might think were dealing now. Yvonne Tan Bunzl came from Vienna, and she was in London. Now, she was really a very attractive young woman, and people noticed her. And on one of the first sales she ever went to, some photographer for the—one of the major newspapers—took a full-length picture of her and they ran it on the front page to show—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: What was her last—what's her last name?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Tan Bunzl. B-U-N-T-Z-L [sic], I guess.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: B-U-N-T-Z-E-L [sic]. Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Z-L, I think. But in any event, she had had some involvement with the Rothschild family, I think she was part of the Rothschild family. But her mother had married a man—I think her mother was a Rothschild. And she was brought up in a castle, and lived very well. but came to England and dealt with important Old Master drawings, and is still around, retired.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And [. . . there was –GA] Kate de Rothschild.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, Kate Rothschild. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. Kate de Rothschild.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Is she from that family—is she a—?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, I didn't realize that.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Jacob Rothschild's daughter.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And she was an active dealer and she's related to Yvonne. Yvonne was tough and gutsy, and Kate was ladylike and gentle. But they seemed to get along well together, and they were [. . . very active –GA]. And Luca [Jean-Luc] Baroni came into London. And he was dealing in drawings, and he became a major dealer. And continues as a major dealer—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. [00:30:05]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —it's a family that had been involved in dealing in Italy and Paris. And Luca became one of the three or four major people in the drawing field for the period from about 1970, right up to the present.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I think we have to move on to the '80s now. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. Well, I haven't up to this point mentioned the Getty. The Getty was not in the picture.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-mm. [Negative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But sometime in '82 or '83, the Getty began to be organized in a way that allowed them to think about what fields they would be interested in. And they had a young person, a curator, who came there, by the name of George Goldner. Goldner was in their photography department and was dealing somehow in photography—whether it was from an editing point of view, or publication, or whatever. But he was interested in Old Master drawings. And I remember in '83, I imagine, and—or '82. And I remember having spent some time with him, and with Ian Woodner. Now, Ian was my good friend.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we would go to auctions. And I would tell him he was becoming a major factor, and I would fight with him over what he should buy and what he shouldn't buy.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He had been a collector in the '60s and '70s, and a dealer. [00:32:03] But his real involvement was in real estate, and he was what would be described as a real estate mogul. He built major real estate properties in New York and Washington, and he had apartments. And some people criticized the way he ran them, but he was a big-picture person. He had people doing the work around him. And he was an artist himself, a very good artist. He did Redon-type paintings and other things, and had exhibitions which always sold out. But—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, George advised Ian? George Goldner?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, they didn't know each other—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and they didn't particularly like each other.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they became competitive, as things developed. But Ian—George Goldner began trying to convince the Getty people that they should be in the drawing field. And he—Bob Light also tried to convince them. And Bob Light by this time had moved to Santa Barbara, and was living in a lovely house overlooking Santa Barbara and Montecito. And he had talked with the Getty about a certain sale where he said there was a wonderful Rembrandt, it was Cleopatra. Red—crayon drawing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Red chalk, mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And George Goldner talked with Bo b about the fact the Getty wanted to bid on the Rembrandt. And they felt that was an appropriate work of art for them. [00:34:00] Whether it was a drawing or whatever, it would fit what they wanted to do. And Bob Light spoke to me and told me that the Getty had given him a commission, and that he was going to be bidding on the Rembrandt.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Now which sale was this?

GEORGE ABRAMS: The sale about 1983, roughly.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I thought that was interesting. We were all looking at it. I was not a candidate because I knew it would bring £100,000, or £200[,000], and I knew it was going to be a high-price drawing. But then Ian Woodner talked to me about it, and said he wanted the Rembrandt. I didn't tell him—I couldn't tell him—what Bob Light had told me. And I said, "Oh. He said he was going to buy it." Well, when Ian said he was going to buy it, he usually bought something.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was willing to pay. And I knew that the Getty was looking to buy, and Ian was looking to buy. Well, Maida and I went in, this was at Christie's, we went into the auction room and sat down. And Ian came over and said, "Move in a seat." And I did. And he sat beside me. And Bob Light came over, and he sat beside Maida.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, we had Bob Light, then Maida, me, and Ian Woodner. And I'm sitting there—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Thinking, "Do do do do do." [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —this is going to be interesting. And the Rembrandt came up as next to last drawing in the [morning –GA] sale. And Ian started bidding. And Bob Light came in, and was already going pretty high. Bob Light came in at £180,000. [00:36:00] And Ian bid 190, and Bob Light bid 200. And the bids went up. And I knew what Bob Light's maximum was. I didn't know what it was, actually. But Bob Light finally bid £300,000. Commission would be on top of that. And he said to Maida, "Can you see who's bidding against me?"

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, he couldn't tell that it was Ian?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No. They were [. . . on opposite ends of the row –GA]and nobody was, you know visibly doing anything. They all had their way of bidding. And Maida said, "I can't see anything."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Ian said to me, when it hit 300, "Do you think I should keep going?" And I said, "Ian, don't ask me, I'm paralyzed."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Good answer.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Ian stopped.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Bob Light got the drawing for the Getty. My theory is, if the Getty had been outbid, they never would have collected drawings, and the field would still be a wonderful, intellectual field for lawyers and doctors. And it might have been quite different. But we went out to lunch afterwards. And George Goldner was with us, and Bob Light, and Ian Woodner, and Maida, and me. And it was a nice restaurant right across the street from Christie's on King Street.

And we were all in there. Now, the last—one of the last drawings in the sale was an Avercamp drawing, an ice skating scene in color. [00:38:00] And it had been estimated—it had come up once before, maybe six months. And I had tried to think about it, but I didn't get it. And it estimated at 30 to £40,000. It didn't sell. The excitement over the Rembrandt caused it not to sell, I guess. And I went up to Noel after the sale and said, "I want to make a bid on that drawing. And I would like to buy it." And he said, "Okay. Come after lunch, and I'll talk with the owner, and we can probably work it out."

And I remember having lunch with Ian and I said, "You know, Ian, that Avercamp didn't sell, and I'm thinking of buying it. I'm supposed to see Noel after lunch." And Ian said to me, "The Avercamp didn't sell?" I said, "No." And he said, "Oh." And he got up and went over across the street to Christie's and went to Noel, this I found out an hour later, and said, "I'm going to buy that drawing. I'll pay the full amount of the estimate, the £30,000."

And Noel said he had to sell it to him. I was mad at Ian, of course. I wrote him a note. I remember I said, "I don't understand why Maida and I have to suffer because of your unrequited love affair with Cleopatra."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he never answered me, or wrote back. But I didn't let it interfere with our relationship. We stayed friends.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, I recently went to a lecture by Noel. And he said that the Christie's sale was really not—sorry. Not the Christie's sale. [00:39:54] The Chatsworth sale was just the thing that sort of catapulted Christie's into—oh, his department into, you know, the big time and, sort of, leaped over Sotheby's and, you know, really became—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Were you at that lecture?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was at it, too.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was interesting, I thought.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Chatsworth was negotiating—and that was the Duke of Devonshire—was negotiating with Christie's to sell a group of drawings. Sell a group of drawings, the Duke said, in order to fix the roof and some other repairs. And other people said he had some outside interests that caused him to need money. And he had a price that they felt was appropriate, which I think was about five-point-seven million pounds. And there were about 75 drawings involved.

John Rowlands was the keeper at the British Museum, and he had valued the drawings at five-point-one million. And I guess it was a recommendation that the British government would back the British Museum, or whoever—whether they were doing it through one of their foundations or what for the five-point-one that he had come up with. It could have been even five-point-three. The Duke said no. He had a price that he thought was appropriate, and it was five-point-seven. And they ran—and ran into an impasse. And Noel Annesley was involved in that negotiation. And it fell through. [00:42:00] And suddenly, it was announced that there'd be 75, I'm saying, drawings from the Chatsworth sale which would be sold to Christie's.

Now, Noel had picked out the 75 from the Chatsworth collection, getting a representative example, but not diminishing—other than the loss of masterpieces—the collection, by leaving equivalent or better drawings in the Chatsworth collection. Many cases equivalent. In one or two cases, really hurting the Chatsworth exhibition by giving up things. The excitement began to grow among drawing collectors, but it began getting to grow among the English public. And the public, drawing-interested public everywhere. The drawings were spectacular.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: How did you feel when this came out?

GEORGE ABRAMS: There were eight Rembrandt drawings that had been picked out. There were 27 [or 28 –GA] total, I think, in the Chatsworth collection. And eight were picked out for sale with this group. In addition to the Rembrandts, there was a great Raphael drawing. There was a Leonardo, little head of an old man. There was an unbelievable Vasari sketch that was a loss, a major loss, for Chatsworth. And then, there were Rubens, and Van Dycks, and other things in that sale. Pontormo. [00:44:00] It was a wonderful group, and they never expected anything like that to come out.

Well, I, of course, was fastened on the Rembrandts. And Ian Woodner was zeroed in on the Vasari sketch page,

with what appeared to be Botticelli and other artists. And Gene Thaw was looking at a Mantegna, and some Rembrandt. And we all were circling.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But, you know, it was clear that their prices were going to be pretty high. Well, Noel was my friend. And Noel showed me what was coming up. I remember he was over in the United States and we had lunch, and he showed me the eight Rembrandts, landscapes. And I said, "Noel, let's talk about where you're going to put these landscapes." And he said, "Well, what do you think?" I said "I want you to put them at the end of the sale. They'll be major, and they'll keep interest in the sale. And maybe some of the other people will be worn out by the time we get to them."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He said, "Well, what do you think?" And we worked out an order of sale, and I can tell you the order right to this moment. We picked—the first drawing was a wonderful drawing with a boat, and very lovely. The second one was a cottage in a landscape. Very powerful, early drawing—not early, but '50s. But powerful. And then, the third one was a drawing that went to a point. [00:46:00] Quite a beautiful drawing. The fourth one was another beautiful drawing that had a known spot in Amsterdam. The fifth one was a landscape with water. The sixth one was—there was one landscape in between that was a small cottage, a smaller drawing.

The one I was most interested in was the next to last. And Noel agreed that that would be a good spot for it. And that was a landscape drawing with a cow, and water, and a little bit of a windmill here, and a cottage in the center. And it had ducks swimming in a pond. And Rembrandt had used three different pens on the drawing, it was very beautiful.

And the last one was a forest scene that was a little less interesting, it was rubbed one way or another. But we put those—and Noel agreed to put them at the end of the sale. And the one I really wanted was the landscape of the cow, but I loved the other drawing right before it that went to a point. It was a known location.

When the sale finally occurred, it was a shock. As we—we knew there was a lot of interest in it. And Noel told me that he would have a main salesroom, and they needed at least one satellite room with television connection. And then, he told me they needed a second one.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Uh-oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I said, "You mean that whole big main gallery, and then two other galleries, are going to be set up for people? [00:48:06] And you're going to pipe photographs of the auction sale into those two?" He said, "The interest is incredible." So, we knew we had some problems. And I was friendly with Johnny van Haeften, who was a young Dutch dealer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: We were always very close, and his wife, Sara. And I said, "Johnny, you got to help me. You're going to sit with me, and we're going to bid." And he said, "Yes, okay. That'll be good." So, we went down King Street walking to the sale, and we were shocked. All outside of Christie's there were crowds of people. And there were TV cameras, and photographers, and excitement like no auction sale I had ever seen.

And we had to fight our way into the gallery. And we did have seats. And Johnny sat next to me on one side, and Maida on the other. And the sale began, and it was clear that it was an emotional event. And people who were in the main room were excited to bid. But as it turned out, in the auction some people were bidding in the two satellite rooms. And some people in the satellite rooms, who weren't able to get tickets because they weren't considered important enough, bought some of the drawings.

And we were sitting there, and the Rembrandts were coming up late. And Ian, who I was not sitting with, but I had talked to, bought the Vasari sketch sheet. [00:50:00] And that was four or five million pounds, I think. And Gene Thaw bought something early, and did not get the Montagna. Other people were bidding. And I didn't know at the time, but George Goldner had several people bidding for the Getty in different places in the room. I saw that prices were going double and triple what was expected, maybe even more. And the excitement was enormous. And I thought, "Well, this Rembrandt stuff is going to be tough."

But we got through most of the auction. I remember the Rubens sold, and the Van Dyck. They were beautiful. And then, the first Rembrandt came up of the sale. And I think Gene Thaw was bidding on that, but he got outbid. Turned out, unknown to me, it was by the Getty.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the second one came up, and that was beautiful. And I think the Getty outbid people on that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The third one was bought by a young English collector by the name of Pilkington. That was the weakest. The third and the eighth were the weakest of the eight drawings. The fourth was bought by John Gaines. The fifth one was bought by Richard Day. No. No. The fifth one was bought—fifth one was bought by another collector. [00:52:09] Richard Day and I were both interested in the sixth and seventh.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The sixth drawing I had—I underbid. And Richard Day got it for £360,000, plus commission. 400-plus-thousand pounds, which was about 600 or more thousand dollars, maybe 700. The one I most wanted was the seventh one. Now, I was sitting with Johnny and I didn't want people to see me bidding on it. And I had Johnny under instructions that when my catalog was open, I wanted him to bid on that drawing. When I closed it, I was out. And we started bidding. Richard Day had bought two, I think, already. It turned out that was for a young collector by the name of Currier, who was a member of one of the major families, perhaps Mellon, or one of the major families.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. And they gave Currier House at Harvard, I think. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And other things, I mean.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he had gotten two drawings for Currier. So, he was a little bit used up. And Woodner was used up because of the wonderful sketch sheet—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The Vasari.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —Vasari sketch sheet. And Thaw was used up for something else. [00:54:03] And the Getty had bought also some things, turned out 21 of the drawings, I think.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, I remember the Getty. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, we were bidding on drawing number seven. My sketchbook was—my catalog was open, and Johnny was bidding for me. And the bidding got up to about 360—£380,000. And Johnny said, "Are you still in this?"

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: My catalog was open, and I said, "Barely." But then it was knocked [. . . down to –GA] us. And I remember Noel said, "Sold to the young Dutch dealer van Haeften." And he specifically named him. Well, I was terrified because one, I didn't know where I was going to get the money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And two, what had I done?

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But Johnny had said—and we had talked before, he said that if I was struggling, he would work out a way for me to get help. And that encouraged me a bit. And so, the sale—the eighth one got sold, and that was the one I liked least. And then, the sale was over. And I was stunned, but nobody knew I had bought anything. And Maida was excited and not as upset as I was. And I remember we went to a party afterwards at Johnny and Sara's house, and Pilkington was there. And we were there.

And I think Goldner was there. [00:56:00] And [a group of other buyers were there. –GA] But I really was in a daze. And I was—everybody was talking about the sale and everything. And the next day, I said, "Maida, we've got to get out of here."

[They laugh.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I can't stand it.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, we went to Amsterdam.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I'm in Amsterdam, and I'm kind of wondering what's going to happen now. I can figure out the money, and where I can borrow some money, and so forth. And I get a call at my hotel, it's a hotel I developed.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Hotel Sonesta.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was from Konrad Oberhuber.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "Konrad, how you doing?" He said, "I've got some incredible news." I said, "What?" "You know that incredible Buytewech drawing on loan to the museum here?" I said, "Yes, a Cambridge man owns it." And he said, "He's selling it." I said, "Oh, my God."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He said, "He's selling it to the Getty." I said, "You're kidding me." And he said, "Yes, they've got a price, and they're going to sign some papers. And I've spoken to the owner, and he said if the Fogg is interested, they can still make a deal." And he gave me the name of the lawyer. Well, I had just bought the Chatsworth, and I was in debt, and all that stuff, and here was this information. And then, he tells me the name of the lawyer. Name of the lawyer is Edward Lane in Boston. [00:58:00] I said, "Oh, my God." He said, "What?" I said, "He's one of my father's closest friends." And they had been, forever.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "I had better call him." So, I called, and I got Ed Lane. And I was friendly with him, I mean, the whole family was. I said—he was a well-connected Harvard lawyer, who represented a Yankee family who had a man who had bought the Buytewech at a shop in Cambridge. The Bernheimers had a place in Cambridge for a bit. It was anonymous, but they brought it to Seymour Slive, and Seymour identified it immediately.

And I said, "Ed. There's a drawing by Buytewech that you're in the process of closing a deal with the Getty." He said, "Yes." And I said, "It's not closed yet?" He said, "It's not closed yet." I said, "I want to buy it." And he said, "You can buy it, the Getty hasn't had a formal agreement. We haven't written anything." I said, "What's the price I can buy it for?" And he said to me, "We have set a price of $120,000." And I said, "Wow. I think I would like to do it. I mean, I got some other issues, but I think I would like to do it."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he said, "Okay, I'll draft up an agreement for you. And my fee will be $1,000 for the transaction, and I'll get that from the seller." [01:00:02] And I said, "Draft it up, Ed. And fax it to me, or get it to me, and I'll sign it." And he did, but there was one change, that I had to pay the $1,000 for his fee.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, I bought it for $121,000, which was a ton of money in those days. That was 1983, I don't know what that would be worth today.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: '84, right? Because the Chatsworth sale—

GEORGE ABRAMS: '84, yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. Ton of money.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —I bought the drawing, and got that amount of money together. And I was waiting while the English government was blocking the export of a number of the Christie's—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, the Chatsworth. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —sale of the Chatsworth drawings. And mine was blocked.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: There were three of the Rembrandts that were blocked.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The Raphael was blocked. The Vasari sketch sheet was blocked. There were about 22 drawings that were blocked.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: The Duke of Devonshire was unsettled, because they were blocking all those drawings, and he wanted the money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The sale took, you know, a lot more than five-point-one million pounds, right? [Laughs.] Five-point-seven million—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Twenty-nine million pounds—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —for the sale.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that—clearly, Rowlands had made a bad mistake. But with the blockage, a lot of the money that he expected wasn't coming in.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: [01:01:59] And they wanted interest from 30 days from the sale, even though the export license was blocked.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: From the buyers, or from Christie's?

GEORGE ABRAMS: From the buyers.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I got very angry, and I had some disagreement with Noel, and the Duke of Devonshire finally backed off that demand. Well, they released all of the blocked drawings, except for the three Rembrandts. Now, I appeared with Johnny van Haeften, we appeared in front of the English Export Board, and John Gere was on it, and all these major English knowledgeable scholars. And I tried to argue that there were enough good Rembrandts, and this was overlapping. And this had some condition issue, I said, and I remember John Gere, big hearing, and I showed photographs of the Rembrandts that are in the English collection, and there were some good things. Maybe not quite as good as some of the Chatsworth ones.

But I made my presentation, I thought it was effective, and John Gere said something. "Let me look at the drawing again." And he took the drawing, and he said, "Condition is great. He used three different pens. We don't have anything like this." And so, they denied the export license. And they continued to deny the other two, one that the Getty had bought, and one that Gaines had bought, and the one I had bought. And there was another six months' delay, and at the end of that period, they put in another six months' delay. [00:02:02] Well, in that period, I didn't have to pay.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] That was sort of lucky.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I was trying to get the money. And I was really trying to figure out how to do that. And I sold a couple of things, I remember. And then, I get a call, one evening, and it's John [. . . Rowlands –GA]. He said, "George, I've just signed the export license for your Rembrandt." And I said, "Oh, God, thanks, John." He said, "I figured it's better if you get it than the Getty gets theirs, and I'm taking the Getty one."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.].

GEORGE ABRAMS: I said, "I guess I can't tell anybody that story." He said, "No." He said, "But I figured that the public interest and otherwise, in your area, you'll loan it to people, and it would make sense."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Plus, it'll be back on the market—I mean, theoretically it could come back on the market.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It could come back on the market. But he didn't want it back on the market. So, I said, "It's all signed, when does it get to the—get it so I can pick it up?" He said, "You could pick it up the day after

tomorrow." So, I did, it's the same thing I did with the Goltzius. I flew over and picked it up before they changed their minds.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Good idea.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the—Christie's gave me a little while to pay the whole amount, which I did. But I mentioned before, that I always felt broke or poor. And believe me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: You know, I always considered, when I acquired a drawing, that I had spent the money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that it wasn't an asset, it wasn't something that related to money anymore. And I didn't think of money anymore.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Interesting. [00:04:01]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that's why I think it's possible for me to give away the drawings, the way I do. I don't relate it to money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Any of the art to money. It's art.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I want to go there in a little while. One question I had for you that we didn't cover yesterday was Flemish drawings, et al. You mostly talked about your Dutch collection, and being interested in Dutch. And you do have some Flemish drawings, but what's your sort of relationship to Flemish drawings?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was collecting Dutch and Flemish, initially. And I got some—I had a good Jordaens, one I wish I still had. I had some—I had a wonderful Lucas van Uden. But I found the Flemish less interesting for me. Often it related to religious subjects.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Which we don't have too much in the Dutch collection.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: The Dutch were breaking away from that. I never owned a Rubens, or a van Dyck. But had I continued collecting in that area, you have to buy a Rubens and van Dyck. I wasn't at that stage, and I didn't have to go to it, if I pretty well stopped buying Flemish.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the religious aspect to the Flemish drawings kind of made it easier for me to turn that area off, and concentrate on the Dutch.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. But you did buy one fabulous Flemish drawing. It turned out to be a fabulous purchase. [Laughs.]. Which was not religious.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, well, I've got a couple of others that you don't know about.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But that was at an incredible event I mentioned yesterday. [00:06:02] And I never tried to make discoveries.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I want to know more than other people. I want to know more than dealers. But I don't want to necessarily make discoveries, because I find that makes you reach too much. And sometimes, you'll buy something in the hopes that it's a discovery, and then it may either be a weak drawing by the artist, or something that isn't what you hope.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I will buy an anonymous drawing on occasion. It's when I find it particularly beautiful. And I often don't care whether the name comes to it or not. But I won't spend the same money on an anonymous drawing, than if it had a major name.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: If I can buy it reasonably, then I can like it, and keep it. And I've got some Dutch drawings in that category. I got rid of a lot of drawings where we were uncertain on attributions. Because I didn't want too much uncertainty about drawings in my collection.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. So, what did you purchase the Pieter Bruegel as, and how did that go?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I was looking through a catalog of an auction sale outside of The Hague, that was not a major auction house. I think it had been set up after a man by the name of [. . . Glerum –GA] , who was with Mak van Waay, left, and Mak van Waay was taken over by Sotheby's.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, oh, oh, Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And [Glerum] left Mak van Waay and set up for a period of time a small auction house, between The Hague and Amsterdam, or someplace out there. [00:08:06]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And there was a catalog, and in that catalog, I remember was a nice large Jacob Cats skating scene in color, which I thought was great. And then, there was a small illustration of a drawing, which was a 16th-century drawing, which either was listed as anonymous or attributed to Jan Brueghel. And I looked at it, and I thought, "Wow, this is a beautiful 16th-century drawing." It had an inscription on it that said Brueghel, and I suppose that's why the auction house had attributed it to Jan Brueghel, or suggested it was. But I looked at it, and I said, "Well, it looks pretty interesting." And it was estimated at maybe 8,000 to 10,000 guilders.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Hm.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Anonymous Flemish drawing, what do you pay for an anonymous Flemish drawing? Well, you know, I probably wouldn't bid on it, normally, but I thought this one was so beautiful. So, I called a dealer friend, and I put friend in quotation marks, and I said, "You know, there's a sale at [Glerum]'s new auction house." [. . .This was an Amsterdam, dealer, 19th century, and he had some good things. –GA] And I said, "There's a drawing I'm interested in. Could you take a look at it? And I think I would like to buy it. [00:10:00] It's estimated about eight to 10,000 guilders," which at that time was about $4,000. And I said, "I would probably go to [. . . 12,000 guilders –GA] on it." And he said, "I'll take a look at it." I didn't hear from him, and I called him the day after the auction. I said, "You know, you were supposed to call." He said, "Well, the drawing went for 11,000."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Dollars or guilders?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Guilders.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "Well, you knew that was an area I was certainly interested in." I said, "Who bought it?" And he said, "I was, I bought it."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: He did, the dealer bought it?

GEORGE ABRAMS: He said it was over the area, I think it was a little over the area I had suggested. He said, "I bought it." And I said, "That's strange." I said, "Well, you're going to give me first refusal, and I'm going to buy it." And he said, "No, I would like to keep it." And I said, "No, I don't think that's right." And he said, "Well, I'll come over to Maastricht when you're coming," and I was coming, "and we'll talk about it, I'll bring it." So, I met him before Maastricht, and he said he wanted to keep it. And I said—and I looked at it, it was very beautiful.

And I said, "No, I want to buy it. What do I have to pay you?" He said, "I want $25,000." And I said, "That's not fair." He said, "Well, that's the way it is." And I looked at it, and I said, "Okay, I'm going to buy it." He said, "I would like a check now. I'll put it in." [00:12:04] We didn't transfer money so easily that way. I said, "Well, you can't cash it for 10 days. I've got to put some money into the account." And he said, "Okay."

So, I gave him a check, and I took the drawing, and I went in and I was vetting at Maastricht, and I was mad at myself. I said, "I had done a dumb thing. It's a stupid amount of money for an anonymous drawing, not even in the area I really collect in." And I didn't have any money for Maastricht. And so, I was mad the whole fair. I went home, and I took the drawing and I put it into a solanderbox, and I wouldn't look at it, I was mad.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, three or four months later, Bill Robinson was by, and he was looking for the solanderbox, and he found the drawing. And he said, "This is fantastic." And I said, "It's a crazy story. I don't want to see it." He said, "We've got to send this to—"

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Hans Mielke?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Hans Mielke. "We've got to send it to Hans Mielke, and see what he says, he knows this field and he's really good at it." So—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Was he at the Morgan by then?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, he was at Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And he said, "I'll take it and make photographs, and we'll send it off." And I said, "Take it, I don't want to look at it."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he took it, and about three weeks later, 7 a.m. on a Sunday morning, I get a call. It's Bill. He said, "I heard from Hans Mielke." He said, "He called me at 3 a.m. He thought it was 3 p.m. in the United States."

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, "Oh, what did he say?" He said, "The greatest discovery in years. It's a drawing, he said, by Peter Brueghel the Elder." [00:14:03] And I said, "Peter Brueghel the Elder? You're kidding." He said, "No, and he wants us to come over and show it to him." Now, Hans Mielke was sick at the time. He had cancer. And I said, "Well, we had better show it to him." And Bill said, "When can you go?" And I said, "In 10 days." So, we flew over a week after, and Hans Mielke was in the hospital at that time, and he could only see one person at a time. So, Bill took the drawing in to him, and showed it to him. And he said Hans cried, and he said, "It's so beautiful." And he said, it's Brueghel's best landscape, he thought. And I went in and just said good-bye to him, and then he died a few months later.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, the sale was in '92. Was that when he died?

GEORGE ABRAMS: About that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. Oh, so it went very quickly. It wasn't like you had it for a few years. Okay, interesting.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he had photographs and other things. Posthumously, his book came out. And it's number seven in his book. And then, they asked for it to be in the Brueghel show, the Pieter Brueghel the Elder show.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was, it was featured in there. In Rotterdam, they made it the main drawing. And I understood that the dealer went to the show.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And somebody reliably tells me that he went up, looked at the drawing, and fainted. But I'm not sure that's true.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]. Okay, I want to touch briefly a little bit on Bill Robinson, and your relationship with him, which has been very extensive over the years. And then, maybe a little break, and then we're going to have to talk about the future. The present and the future.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Okay. [00:16:08]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, Bill Robinson was a grad student at Harvard in the early '80s, and he didn't know about Dutch drawings.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Bill had gone to John Hopkins, and he came to Harvard to do graduate work in art. He was in fact interested in Seymour Slive, as a teacher. He knew his work. But his second week at Harvard, he came over to the house, I don't know whether Konrad Oberhuber brought him, or Seymour, but he came over to the house,

and I started showing him Dutch drawings, and we looked at quite a few. And he stayed late. I remember it was after 12, and we were still looking at drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he was excited, and he said, "Can I come back in a couple of days, a few days?" And I said, "Sure." And he came back, and we looked at more, and he was clearly excited. And he said, "You know, I might like to work in this field instead of Italian." And he switched, and he was a student of Seymour's. They were close. And he would spend a lot of time, he wasn't married at the time, and he would spend a lot of time with us. And we would look at things, and he was doing reading and studying and working, and was learning a lot. And I was turning material over to him, and I had a good library, and he was really into Dutch drawings. And working with Seymour, he was working on his thesis. [00:18:00]

And he stayed at Harvard for a number of years, went to the Morgan as a curator there, was editor for a period of Master Drawings. And then, Konrad left, and the curatorship in drawings was open, and Bill was the likable and the logical person. He quickly was selected. And came to Harvard, and then he got his PhD. And I remember that his family, for various reasons, couldn't be at graduation, but I've got pictures of Seymour and Bill and me at his graduation. He's in his cap and gown, and he's got his degree, and we attended that.

And we stayed close, and Bill has written beautiful material on Dutch art, and on my collection, and he's done catalogs. There was a major one for an exhibition at the Rijksmuseum, went on to the Albertina, where Konrad was the director, and then it went to the Morgan Library, where I think—I don't remember whether that exhibition might have been before Bill got to Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I think it was, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, it was at the Morgan, and ended up at Harvard. And Bill did the catalog, which was a very beautiful catalog. And then, he did the catalog of the exhibition in 2001, 2002, that went to the British Museum, and the Netherlands Institute, and ended up at Harvard. He was doing a lot of work on the collection. [00:20:01] And the collection had items that were—drawings in it that were requested for almost every major Dutch drawing exhibition on individual artists. Jan Lievens, Arent de Gelder, any of the Dutch areas, there were things that curators borrowed. And Bill took care of all that. And he did work on other areas, and was a great drawings scholar, became one of the three or four best drawings scholars, Dutch drawings scholars, in the world. Peter Schatborn, Bill Robinson, Martin Royalton-Kisch, Holm Bevers. That's the four major groups.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: The four major people, and you could add some of the older people, Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, Christopher White. Not much beyond that who can be close to them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, I'm going to pause here.

[Audio break.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: All right, here we go. Okay, so Bill Robinson moved to the Fogg, and then he became the first Maida and George Abrams Curator of Drawings.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And then, in 1999, you gave a gift of 110 of your drawings to the Fogg. So, the question that I haven't seen answered before is, your relationship with the Fogg, had you in some ways always kind of planned to give your collection to the Fogg, do you think? Was this an idea that grew slowly with you? Did you have any thought of filling in drawings that the Fogg didn't have? Well, those are a lot of different questions. But when would you say that the idea of, you might give your collection to the Fogg, or some of your collection, sort of entered your mind? [00:22:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I had always been involved with the Fogg. I had been on their visiting committee, the visiting committee of the fine arts department, and the visiting committee of the Harvard museums, since the late '60s. And many of the teachers were friends of mine, and people that I knew well.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the history of drawings, and its evolving activities in the United States, were involved with Harvard. I had a lot of other involvements with Harvard. I was trustee of the Harvard Crimson Foundation, and I owned, as a trustee, the building in which they operated, and I raised money to get the building rebuilt. And it was beautifully rebuilt. We had great editors of *The Crimson* who became great writers in the public, people like David Halberstam, and J. Anthony Lewis, and J. Anthony Lucas.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, very intense involvement with Harvard your whole life, really.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And my father had gone there, and my sister was a year ahead of me at Harvard, at Harvard Law School. My father had been at Harvard, and Harvard Law School, my uncle at Harvard and Harvard Medical School, and another uncle at Harvard and Harvard Law School. A lot of involvement there, but not a lot of involvement in the drawing activities, is there?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Now, the question is, and I had to consider it, what am I going to do with the drawings?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. [00:24:00] That you've started this collection, and you have this connection to Harvard, but what did you want to do? Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I could sell it. People sometimes say they like other people to enjoy the pleasures that they got from collecting art, collecting drawings. I don't believe that. I think when they sell their collection, they want the money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But there's a competitiveness. You don't want other people to own the drawings that you love. So, I started thinking that—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Sorry, what about your children? Not so much interest?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got two daughters, very smart, nice daughters. One is not married, interested in art, among other things, has done very interesting things. She likes the drawings, follows the field. Collects some of her own type things, but not Old Master drawings. I have another daughter, married, and a grandson. She knows a lot about art, she went to Harvard, and had a summa in her department of environmental studies, and is a photographer. I sent her to be a lawyer, and she came out a photographer.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: She is very smart, and writes very well. Wonderful photographer. She married an ex-National Geographic photographer, who's widely exhibited now, and has books of his photography. Her son is 17, and he's interested in many things. He's a good strong student. And he loves the drawings, and other things. But as for possessing them, they don't seem to have a drive to possess them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. [00:26:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I will have them keep certain things they like.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But they don't want to be drawing collectors.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that's true of paintings, too. They'll get a few small paintings, but they don't want the major ones.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. They don't want them.

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, and they're well-adjusted. They are not driven for fancy cars, or fancy living, or anything of that nature. They're very sensible in how they do things. So, they're not pushing for a lot of money either. Which is nice, in terms of taking any pressure off.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Of what you want to do with your collection.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, yes. And they're quite excited about some of the things that are happening in drawings being set up, and a legacy, and other things. So, they seem to be excited about a lot of other things.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you've thought about what would you do with your collection, and the children weren't really that much of an issue, so, you know.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I didn't want to see the collection broken up. Because I knew how hard it was to put it together.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Most people won't understand how hard it was, and how to add to it, and occasionally subtract from it. But I knew that it was unique in that it had been put together over an almost 60-year period. Some things had been acquired through extremely fortuitous events, and I worked pretty much full-time as a hobby, not even a hobby, as an avocation, or whatever you want to call it. And I thought it would be a mistake to let it dribble off in different places. [00:28:00] And it's much stronger and more important as a unit.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the drawings fed off each other. So, what I thought was, I wanted to put together the best Dutch drawing collection I could, with the fact that I didn't come from a wealthy background, and that it's awfully hard to collect drawings from the United States. It's a European collecting area, and the drawings were basically in Europe, until we began shifting some here. And I thought the collection was unique for this country, and North America.

So, I began to think in terms that I was going to set up the collection in the United States. I was involved with the Museum of Fine Arts, a longtime trustee in Boston. But somehow or other Harvard's history, and my involvement, seemed to make a gift to Harvard more sensible than a gift of drawings to the MFA, or even splitting up and giving some to the MFA and some to Harvard. I thought, "It's better if they stay together." Now, that wasn't easy thinking, and I got a lot of, what shall I say, help in arriving at that conclusion, from Bill Robinson.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Susan Anderson, who's my curator and works at Harvard. And some of the Harvard people, and people in the field. Peter Schatborn, and Martin Royalton-Kisch. Now other people thought that I shouldn't do that. [00:30:01] And the Boston Museum wanted me to join in with Eijk and Rose-Marie Van Otterloo, and the Weatherbies, and be the third person in that group. They just put together the paintings, and are talking about the Dutch art center [Center for Netherlandish Art] at the Museum of Fine Arts.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: There's a long history behind that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, I want to talk a little bit about that, too, so.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And discussions we had, and for a number of reasons, I finally made a decision which may have unsettled the MFA, and the Weatherbies and Van Otterloos. Just that I wouldn't do it with the drawings. I've got other things I might consider putting into the Dutch art center, such as a number of very good paintings, a number of works of art, Dutch works of art, and bronzes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got a very important wood sculpture by the great artist of the 15th century in the Netherlands, Van Wesel. The only one in America. I've got a really important Dutch 16th- and 17th-century historical medals, Dutch historical medal, collection. Silver.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Didn't you give a few drawings to the MFA, or were they on sort of loan?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've given works of art to 10 or 12 New England museums. None of my major Dutch drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. [00:32:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: A couple of good Dutch drawings. The MFA got a Jordaens, and it got a Bouckhorst. And it got an Esaias van de Velde. But the best of the Dutch drawings are at Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, the first 110, how did you choose those? And was that the sort of first volley to see how you felt, or how they felt, or how it was going to go, or what was your thinking back then?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, it wasn't the first 110.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Over the years, I've given a number of works of art to Harvard. And to other museums.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I gave a James Ensor drawing to Harvard. I gave several Sir Edward Burne-Jones drawings to Harvard. I gave some English drawings to Harvard, other English drawings. I gave 40 other [Dutch –GA] drawings from 1967 to 1999, in addition to the 110, that are very good drawings. Dutch. And so, the number of drawings in the collection that Harvard had outright was not 110, which we gave in 1999.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But there was another 40 beyond that. So, there's 150 in that group. And what I did was, I tried to choose a representative group of the collection. But in there, I put about 15 drawings of top-level, that were really hard for me to give away.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] [00:34:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I put in the Rembrandt, Chatsworth drawing, with the cow.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE ABRAMS: I put in another, my first Rembrandt I ever bought, the *Abraham and the Angel*, or someone else and the angel. I put in the Jacques de Gheyn *Gypsy Mother and Child*. I put in the Cornelius Vroom, the fence and the road landscape [*Landscape with a Road and a Fence*].

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yes, right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I put in some early—the Willem Buytewech, three Willem Buytewechs I put in.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: But the Buytewech that you got with Oberhuber, from the Boston collection?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I put that one, plus two others I bought.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE ABRAMS: That was another discovery. I bought a ship drawing, and Altena was the first one [to recognize it as Buytewech. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], van Regteren Altena?

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was in the Buytewech show that was in the Netherlands Institute, in the Rijksmuseum, and other places. I put in [a Jan Lievens landscape into that group. However, I kept out a large number of Dutch drawings, which I kept. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And that was because you weren't ready to give them, and you knew this would be a sequential thing, sort of over time? Or what was the thinking of keeping out?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Twofold. There were some I wanted to keep, personal nature. They might not have been as valuable as others. But I wanted to keep them, just for a while. There were a few that I didn't think were up to the quality that should go there. And I wanted to consider a second gift later on, when I could assess what was happening with the drawings, and what interest there was.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, right, okay. [00:36:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And so, I gave the first group so that they would have a really strong collection. I think the strongest in North America of Dutch drawings. And I kept many of my favorites. And a number of really wonderful drawings, and didn’t give them, and I still have them. Now, that changed when I committed a number, which I'm still working on, supposedly 330. But I now have a list of 300 additional drawings, which will be going to Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, in this past fall, the number that's out in the newspapers is 330 that you gave. And you're saying that that's not an exact number at the moment, or—?

GEORGE ABRAMS: It will probably be a lot more.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Because I didn't give 150 [which were not –GA] on that list that are personal to me. [But because I didn't give 150 which were not on that 300 list that are personal to me. But I will give some of the 150 not designated so far, maybe more than that eventually. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I'm still buying drawings. So, that some of those that I buy will certainly go to Harvard, they fill in voids in the collection.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, right now—well, your collection, though, is still over 700 drawings, if you include the 330. Even after you gave 110, and the other things you've given, how big is your collection at the moment, would you say?

GEORGE ABRAMS: That I personally own.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, I guess so.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got 150.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, that's all you have left at this point?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. [Laughs.] [00:38:02]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got 150 which I consider to be A drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Top. Okay, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I divide my drawings into A, B, and C.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, fascinating, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I know the difference between an A and a B drawing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got 150 that are A drawings that I've kept. There are three Rembrandts, and five Lievens, and two Esaias van de Veldes, and an Adraien van de Velde, and Avercamp too, and those types. I've got 150. Of that 150, 75 of them are right at the top, and 75 may be A-minus.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got another 30 drawings which I don't consider of good enough quality. They may have been mistakes, or whatever.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Are they B or they C?

GEORGE ABRAMS: They're between B and Cs.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got another 30 or 40 that will belong to my grandson and daughters because they're personal, and they would like them. But I've got various other collections. And the collections are probably grouped into 10 different categories.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Collections of Dutch drawings, or of just random?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Non-Dutch drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Non-Dutch drawings, aha. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: French art, Italian art.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Art meaning drawings, or also paintings?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Some drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Bronzes. Works of art, medals.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Medals. Paintings, what about paintings?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got 60 paintings, of which [20 to 30 –GA] are very strong.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] All Dutch and Flemish?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. Which would fit into—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The A? [00:40:03]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The top [65 –GA] of the van Otterloos.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Which is a top level. [20 to 30 –GA] would be As.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: 10 of those would probably go to Harvard, because they relate to drawings. I have a major Willem van de Velde pen painting, a major [Ludolf] Bakhuizen pen painting. I have a really major Jacob van Ruisdael landscape. I have a Cornelis Vroom painting that's one of his most beautiful paintings. Jan Steen, Adriaen Coorte. Salomon van Ruisdael, Esaias van de Velde. Cornelis and Herman Saftleven. [Dirck] Hans—Hals. I've got Gerbrand van den Eeckhout. Then I've got other [. . . good –GA] paintings that are, you know [by –GA], Adriaen van Ostade, [Jan van Goyen –GA] and other people who I like and are good quality.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, what of those might you give to the MFA, or—let's see, how do we want to talk about this Center? So, you decided not to go in with Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, and Susan and Matthew Weatherbie. But you've had a longstanding relationship with them, or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've had a longstanding relationship with them, closer than anybody would realize. I think I had a lot to do with their collecting. Peter Sutton and I pushed the Weatherbies to collect, and we got mad at them when they were being too timid, and hesitant.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I think we encouraged them, and I've represented them on a number of legal matters relating to art. [00:42:02] [And I've represented Eijk van Otterloo on other non-art areas. . . . –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, interesting.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, I hear things that I wrote 15 years ago, or talks I made 10 years ago, being echoed by other people as if they're [new] concepts and thoughts, and other things. And that bothers me a little bit, but then it doesn't.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Because it's become part of the—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, did this sort of affect your decision, in terms of the gift, or did you really decide that your connection with Harvard and the tradition of Harvard's drawing department, which is so strong, you know, made more sense to keep your drawings at Harvard? Some of both?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Some difficult things happened in connection with that gift. Ten, 15 years ago, I began talking about setting up a Dutch nonprofit organization. With the Weatherbies, and the van Otterloos.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I outlined what I had in mind. [00:44:00] And the reason I wanted it set up separate from a museum was I wanted to control how they would be used, and if they would be used. The greatest worry a collector has if he makes a gift to a museum is that they'll lose interest in the gift, and put them into storage, or solander boxes, or not do anything with them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I felt if we did it through a separate Dutch organization, nonprofit, we could control it and set the rules, and move it if a museum wasn't showing sufficient interest.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, that's sort of the kernel of the Netherlandish research center?

GEORGE ABRAMS: That was something that we were looking, the three of us were looking, to set up. The three

entities. And we talked about it, and we even had somebody we thought would be the director of it. And the Weatherbies were all in on that, and I was willing to do that, but the van Otterloos were hesitant, and still wanting to look at other alternatives. They were enjoying the special dinners that would come with exhibitions, and other activities. And every serious collector goes through a series of thought processes as their collections get exhibited, and I could predict them down to a T.

You start off, and you're excited to have the drawings or paintings shown, they stand out in your mind differently when you see them in different contexts. Then you talk about how you want to educate people and the public, and let the public see how wonderful they are, and how you want to set up programs and lectures. And then, you talk about the effective way to do that, and prevent there being a loss of interest, and the collection being extraneous to a museum. [00:46:08] And then you try to [take some actions that prevent that from happening. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: That's an evolution that every collector goes through, and I watched the Weatherbies—not so much the Weatherbies, but the van Otterloos, go through that. I watched various Dutch collectors do that [like the Kremers. –GA] I've watched Tom Kaplan and what he's been doing, and where he's coming from. And the evolution is so sure to happen, that it's amazing to me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I went through it a lot earlier than these other people.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Because I was out there—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: A long time ago, right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —for 40 years, before any of them came out there. And I've watched Tom Kaplan do the same things that I used to talk about, 30 or 40 years ago, and I've watched the Weatherbies and the van Otterloos. Now, the Weatherbies are new to this, really, they are not public people, they've been very much in the background. They have been lifted above where they would normally be by the van Otterloo collection.

[The van Otterloo collection is superior to the Weatherbies and most other private Dutch collections. The Weatherbies have some good paintings, and 15 or 16 which match the van Otterloos' top group. The van Otterloos have really good paintings, and they've been buying at the top of the market. The Weatherbies have only been doing that the last ten years. So, they're lifted to a higher level, but they are willing to put money into the Center, and match Eijk and Rose-Marie dollar for dollar, and buy now at a top and expensive level. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And what is the vision for the Center at this point, would you say?

GEORGE ABRAMS: [They're trying to work that out right now. They have a meeting next week on Thursday and Friday, where they're bringing in various Dutch people, all of whom I've known for 20 or 30 or more years. I'm not invited to the meeting. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, I thought you were more involved in that, you know. [Laughs.]

[. . . –GA]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And although he's extremely friendly, Matthew Teitelbaum is making a bit of a mistake not including me. And that's because they want to elevate the Weatherbies and the van Otterloos and get them to feel appreciated for their gift. [There is inevitable competition that goes on, and I understand it, luckily, I understand it, so I don't take it to heart too much, or dwell on it. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. This is a little short-sighted, if your drawings are at Harvard. I mean, obviously, then it becomes—Boston becomes this great, rich center.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, they understand that. [But it's difficult to deal with controlling all of the desire to want credit. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: [There is an effort to appear modest but it's not easy to suppress your sense of pride in putting all of this together. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Seems pretty obvious. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Matthew acknowledges it. And I didn't get to a trustee's meeting last time, but he talked about it for about 20 minutes, what a wonderful thing to have the drawings at Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, he understands it. But every so often, they assert [the importance of –GA] what they're doing, versus what's happening over at Harvard. [00:50:05]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, it will be more centered at the—it's going to be centered at the MFA, then?

GEORGE ABRAMS: No.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, no, okay. It'll be separate?

GEORGE ABRAMS: We have our own plans for drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And drawings are a separate field from paintings. It's a separate collecting field. It's a separate group of collectors, they don't overlap always.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It has different scholars. And a different approach to collecting. It's much more scholarly than paintings. Much less dependent on money, finances, [so many more people can be involved. –GA] And Harvard is in the process of setting up a center on Dutch art, which will have drawings as the main aspect, and paintings also as an aspect. And prints, where they have a very strong group.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, this is separate from the—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [Not totally separate, it's yet to be worked out. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And [Harvard is planning on having two or three rooms devoted to Dutch drawings and other Dutch art of that period. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And will you give books also, some of your library?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I'm going to give my library, which is a good working library.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You said 7,000 volumes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: [Including catalogs and miscellaneous things relating to Dutch art and life of the 16th and 17th centuries. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, yes, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it's—I worked out the sale of Egbert's library to the van Otterloos. They had never met Egbert. And I worked out a price with Egbert, and then I brought them together and we had lunch in New York, and [made the deal; even put it in writing. Otto Nauman worked with me on this. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we got the van Otterloos together, and the van Otterloos agreed to buy it. [00:52:02] That was supposed to be for the Netherlands Center that we were going to set up with the three families.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, that's what I thought.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then, Eijk sent it over to the Peabody Essex Museum, and it rested there after it left Egbert, I [had] made it so that Egbert could keep it for a number of years [and then turn it over. –GA] And they digitized it, but it was resting there, and [Eijk was not] acknowledging the Netherlands Institute and our Center's interest in it. That changed, because they made it a main part, or a major part of what they're doing at the MFA, that was supposed to be this separate organization part of what [the three families were doing. Well, okay, those books and that library of 20,000—Ronni Baer calls it 20,000 I think it's a little less, about 16,000 to 17,000 if you count catalogues, pamphlets and the like. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: [But Egbert's library will be at the MFA. –GA] And they will have it available for scholars, and that's fine. Harvard has a great art library. And it has everything that Egbert has, and more. But I want the working library that I have to be part of what's at the Fogg. [It's really a good, practical library for students to work with. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, you might have exhibition catalogs, and the gallery catalogs that you just got, or broadsides or something.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Absolutely. And that's useful in lots of ways. [Annotated auction and dealer catalogues of major and minor exhibitions around the world. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: [Some of the exhibition catalogues are about specific artists, some about groups of artists or special subjects. And I want all of those available so that people can study them in the context of different exhibitions and different aspects of drawing knowledge. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, I have two big questions left over.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Only two?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Well, we can go over some other things. [. . . –GA]

GEORGE ABRAMS: [The MFA and its PR people are painting a history of Dutch art interest in the Boston area which is a little out of balance. The history for them starts in 1987, when they started collecting, or 1988. And that's the history they tell the public. [00:56:00] And that's when they would start the history of Dutch collecting in America, as far as they're concerned, or in the Boston area. But that isn't when the history started. It started in the 1950s and '60s. It started with Slive. It started with Frank Robinson. It started with Peter Sutton, and Jacob Rosenberg.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Rosenberg, yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Jakob Rosenberg, Otto Benesch.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, he was there, too, wasn't he, yes, I'd forgotten that.

GEORGE ABRAMS: The war years at Harvard, and wrote his Rembrandt volumes while he was at Harvard during the war.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, right, I'd forgotten that.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Various scholars have spent time at Harvard. Egbert was brought over by Harvard and spent time there, and then ultimately ended up at Yale.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right

GEORGE ABRAMS: Philip Hofer. Brought all sorts of people over, and was a great force in the drawing field, and in books and art, and all sorts of areas. That doesn't exist for them. [They are not part of that. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, whereas Harvard's always been, even though it had a theoretical period, it's still—

GEORGE ABRAMS: [The support for the study of the actual art, it had a theoretical period, yes. The theoretical period was beaten back, finally. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It took some real work.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Hooray.

GEORGE ABRAMS: [But some people never knew that The Courtauld Institute was modeled after the Fogg Art Museum. The Fogg came first and had a profound influence on the support for connoisseurship. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And specifically, when it [The Courtauld] was set up, there was descriptions of the Fogg and

how they would like to emulate connoisseurship, and center on works of art as teaching [approach like Harvard. –GA]. [00:58:01] Yale didn't have that, but if Jock Reynolds, who was the director and very aggressive and smart, and John Walsh had their way, they would have convinced the van Otterloos that Yale was at the center of [connoisseurship], and they should give their collections there.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, they had their paintings there still, maybe, or a number of them.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes, [but it would have been a huge mistake for the van Otterloos to have given their collection to Yale or the Peabody Essex. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, they have a good start, they have a great start.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, and they've got all the other great art around [at the MFA], and you shouldn't have it in isolation.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: [You should have it as part of an overall art picture. And they finally realized that and acted on it. But they don't know the history. But I was bothered by all of the people like Rosenberg and Slive and Robinson and Sutton and me being mostly left out of the history of the study and collecting of Dutch art in the area. –GA] And that really was unintentionally and a little bit intentionally what was happening and has been happening. So, you can be sensitive to that, you can be upset with it. I try to rise above that, but I think about it, and it bothers me at times.

Now, the Dutch curators and the auction people have a pretty clear picture of collecting, and what my role was. And they—and some of the key curators got together, and they worked with the executive director of the CODART, and others. And in order to write the history, and not see it go wrong, they made an effort to work out [a balance in the history. –GA] And I didn't know that that was going on. [NB: The Dutch Consulate of New York reached out to selected curators and scholars for assistance with their application to King Willem Alexander for Mr. Abrams's decoration. By tradition, these applications and decorations are kept secret from the awardee. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: You didn't know that?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had no idea it was going on. But they went in, and sat down—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: This was one of my two questions that I mentioned. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And sat down with whoever works on these things, and spelled out that they wanted me to be recognized.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was their push. Now, I didn't—normally, some people organize these things. I had nothing to do [with that sort of thing. –GA] I didn't talk to anybody, didn't advocate. But they advocated it, because they wanted to get the history right.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, can I say what it is, for the record? [01:02:01] That you were recently knighted by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and you're a Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau, correct?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And it was a surprise to me.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Was it a surprise?

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was a surprise to me. I understood that I might be eligible if they thought about it. But I didn't organize it. I've never organized that type of thing.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And when you found out, what was your reaction?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I think I was really moved by it, because I was laboring under the pressure that had been brought on me to join with Eijk and Rose-Marie, and [I rejected that pressure. I know that the drawings are often marginalized by paintings. –GA] And that it's easier to look at the paintings with color and activity and not get deeper into them, than to look at drawings and think about them, and the intricacies, and the artist's thinking that relate to drawings. It's easier to be excited about paintings in that kind of [immediate –GA] way, than to really get into and love drawings. Now, I love drawings, I only like paintings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that's the way it's always been with me. And there are other people who love drawings. And I like paintings, but I'm passive to them. I find a painting exhibition, such as Eijk and Rose-Marie have had, to be interesting, [but for me, not overwhelming. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Whereas, I never find drawing exhibitions [not to be fascinating. –GA] I saw, last night I went over from here to look at a little exhibition at The Morgan that—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The *Van Dyck, Rubens, and—*

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: *—Jordaens*? [00:01:58]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the curator who's going over to the Rijksmuseum—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Ilona [van Tuinen].

GEORGE ABRAMS: —did that and, you know—she's a nice lady. The drawings in the exhibition are wonderful. It's in a small room—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The cube. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —you know all about this.

[They laugh.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I live in New York. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. Their art—and I knew some of those drawings, they're absolutely wonderful. And they've got them on three walls. And there's about eight on each wall. And they've got two cases relating to books. That's a wonderful exhibition.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, it's a lovely little show.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But it's not for a person who's interested in paintings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No. No, not at all.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And so, there's a difference in the field, and the fact that the Dutch government recognized what—I know you're going to have to run—Dutch government recognized the difference. And the curators went out of their way to—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you think that that was why you were knighted. Or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: I know that the curators submitted a lot of material to the Dutch government. And—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Saying that this is your contribution to the field, and—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Talking about it and outlining it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: [And I know that my curator who didn't tip things off to me, Susan Anderson, had to give them lots of material. And they submitted some really terrific things.. . . –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you feel good about that. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But the Weatherbies and van Otterloos will get knighted too. [They have something wonderful and they have pretty good contacts in the Netherlands. –GA] But they'll be able to rectify that situation.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That little competitive situation. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I expected, you know, and I expect that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], right. Okay, so my last question—and we can go over some other things. But just, my last question that I want to get to is, has there been a lot of talk—and this is more with paintings, but I think also drawings, too—that, you know, Old Masters are dead. So, you've been around since the early '60s, you've seen Old Masters coming in—especially drawings—coming into their own, getting tremendous prices and a whole, you know, a couple generations of drawings collecting. So, what do you think about that issue, and going—yes. And what do you think about the sales next week? There's two questions in there, at least.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. There's no question that there's a rush in the last 10 years in the direction of modern and contemporary art. And museums feel the market impact. And when the market is showing interest in contemporary and Dutch art, and when artists walking around today can get $4 million, or $5 million, or $10 million or more for works that they do, when Prince can get $12, $15 million for something he spends a little time on, when Wool can get $4 million for writing a sentence on a wooden plank—museums take notice of that. [00:06:04]

Some of that lasts, some won't. Malcolm Rogers, who was director of the MFA, used to say that he didn't think more than five or 10 percent of modern art would be seriously considered 50 years from now. That may be so. I think it's likely in certain areas, but I don't care. There will be a group of people, and we're trying to create more of them, who will work on the area I like— drawings.

We are creating the curators of the future if we can. We're trying to get them interested, and we are. We've got young people out there who are very good. There's a new curator that we had as a Fellow at the Fogg [working on] Dutch art. And she did a [small] exhibition. She put together the last exhibition of my drawings from 1590 to 1630. She's a good writer. She's smart. She's attractive.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Who's that?

GEORGE ABRAMS: [Austėja Mackelaitė. She worked on Dutch for a year and half at the Fogg and she got to be very good. And the Morgan had an opening for a curator of Northern Drawings and Austjea got the job despite heavy competition. And that's the type of young people we're preparing for and trying to support. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, she's replacing Ilona?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And we've set up—I've helped set up, through a classmate [. . . –GA]—Through a classmate of mine I got Harvard—I got the Fogg a gift of four million dollars, so far. Two million of it—five million, actually—two million of it is for a Fogg Fellow in perpetuity, every year, who will work on the Dutch drawing collection at Harvard, my collection [and other drawings. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And someone's going to come out of that every year. [Two million, the income from that endowment, is for Edouard Kopp, the Maida and George Abrams Curator, to spend on lectures, and catalogs, and travel, and taking students to the Salon du Dessin from the Harvard undergraduate and graduate school, and the income on that in perpetuity is going to be available. And that will create more activity. With that activity, and with the teaching at Harvard and what they're going to set up there, we will have good scholars coming out. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And good scholars will become curators. And curators will interest the public by doing exhibitions and other things. So that when you hear that Old Masters are dead, you have to know that there's a major counterattack going on.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Good God, you know, the institute doesn't even have a—[laughs]—a scholar of 16th, and 17th, and 18th. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I know that. And we need a professorship at Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had the money, and the money was sent to Harvard. And then there was a dispute that took place on how it was being handled. And the person who gave the money took it back. It was such a blow last year, I couldn't believe it. And it set me back a lot, because I worked hard to get it lined up. [00:10:02]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But I've got somebody else who's going to give that money, I think. And I'm working on that

now. And I want to have a professorship there, because with that—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That'll—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —comes more scholars.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And with that, and what's going on at the MFA and what's going on at Harvard, we really are making a—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Boston will be the center.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and we're making a comeback against the rush to modern and contemporary.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: This just goes in cycles.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes—no. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: [But if we can have solid students working in the area, and there will be new scholars and curators created. –GA] Because great art draws students, and people, and collectors. And we can talk forever about Old Masters being dead. I don't think it's so.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, I'm glad to hear it. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we will make a comeback. And the Center in Boston, what the Weatherbies and the Otterloos are doing, are going to be a major factor in the [Dutch] painting area. [. . . –GA] And Harvard's going to be a factor in the drawing area.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the Morgan Library, with the Drawing Institute, and Gene Thaw's activity, will be a major push in the overall drawing area.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we've got others out there. Princeton has some people supporting it. So, with a real effort by people who understand this area, we're coming back strong.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: The general public and some of the newspaper people may not notice it yet. But I know it's happening, and other people are going to see.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I have a funny story I'm going to add about coming back, but just Dutch painting in general, was when Walter did his show of—just he took all the Dutch paintings out of the storage rooms and put them up, which was a brilliant idea for a show because it didn't cost anything, right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It had a wonderful catalog. [00:12:00] And I was getting on the subway one day, and the subway had come from Queens. And there was a construction worker, and he was holding the catalog. And he was going through it, and he was so excited about going to this show. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: [Well, that's what I mean. I've seen that—I've seen that happen much more than people believe. Ronni Baer did that show on class distinctions. It had some wonderful paintings. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the public came and they saw it. And there were people who were enthralled with it. When you have a top drawing or painting exhibition, the public comes, and they love it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I think the future can be good, but we've got to work at it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Well, on that note, do you have anything to say about the sales next week, or you don't know, or—?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I thought that the drawing field was having a lack of material. Paintings also.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: [And that the sales in the future were not going to be as interesting. The sales this week are interesting. I think Sotheby's has two very good collections that two couples put together without people knowing them very well. And it's charming, and they've got very good drawings. And it's going to do well. And Sotheby's has additional drawings in their sale. And Greg Rubinstein is a very good head of the Sotheby's Drawing's Department. He creates interest, and Stijn Alsteens at Christie's does also. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: They [Sotheby's] have Egbert's collection.

GEORGE ABRAMS: They are very well-liked. Yes, well.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Not that it— [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: There, I think it shows that Egbert's taste in Dutch drawings was very academic.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That's what you were saying yesterday.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And there isn't any drawing—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That's the—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —there, with possibly the Jan Baptist Weenix—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —that I [am driven to go after. –GA] [00:14:04]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: No. I find them interesting, but not likeable.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. You don't want to have them.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Right.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And, but there are other drawings, not so much the Dutch. The Dutch field seems not too available. And when you get people like Paul Russell selling a group to Leon Black for a huge amount of money, you're going to see fewer and fewer collections that are going to hit the auction market. So, I think auctions are going to be perhaps less a source, and collecting's going to be harder. But exhibitions will take place. And people will be excited about those. And there are scholars that do them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Any more last thoughts for posterity, or?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I did think a little bit about—I've got it here, and I'll give you the list of collectors over the years of drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay, great. Yes, that's perfect, because they want a list.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And you'll see I've got pretty much everybody in there. Maybe I better put Howard Lepow in there. I didn't write him, but you can write it. [. . . –GA] And Dianne Nixon has been a collector. And—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —I didn't put her down.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Clement Moore you didn't mention.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I did mention him. I got him on that list there.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, he's in here. Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He's a serious collector, and he's putting together a good Dutch collection. [00:16:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes.

GEORGE ABRAMS: [It is a higher quality collection than the Peck collection. The Peck collection, which is going to North Carolina, is not as strong as Chip's group. It's heavy on

"B" drawings, wheras the Moore collection has some good "A" and "B plus". –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It was another collector that you didn't mention, I was going to ask you quickly. Oh. Oh, no, that was just a curator. Never mind.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And also, you know, Dianne Nixon has a very good collection. And there are others. Well, I'll tell you somebody else, David Tobey and Julie Tobey. T-O-B-E-Y. They have a major Italian drawing collection.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And there are others spread around, but, you know, I may not know them as well. I do want to emphasize that this was a European area of collection.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes. No, I think you have. Yesterday was very European-oriented, and you emphasize that. And you—I think that that is a—

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I want to emphasize in the Dutch area the importance of Frits Lugt.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He was a major, major figure who wrote the books, did the catalogs and collected, and set up the Netherlands Institute, and has had exhibitions, and [catalogues. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Talk about someone with energy, right. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. [And left people behind who were going to further—Ger Luijten and Carlos van Hasselt and the other directors there. –GA]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yes, absolutely.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, that is something special.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. Well—

GEORGE ABRAMS: All right.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —thank you very much.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Now, if you want to supplement something sometime, I can do that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: If you think of other questions or things that you want to clarify—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —we can do that at any time.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: All right.

[END OF SESSION.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It's October 25th, 2018. This is session number three with the Frick and the American Archives—Archives of American Art oral history with George Abrams, with Louisa Wood Ruby interviewing. Good

morning, and welcome, George.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Nice seeing you again.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you have expressed concern about a few things from the last interview, and a lot of things have developed during 2018, so we'd love to hear some more.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah, I felt I really didn't handle the details and the potential of what's going on in Boston right now, and I got sidetracked, perhaps, in some of my comments. Perhaps I was a little too cynical, too.

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: In any event, there's a lot going on in Boston which is important for what the future holds for art in the United States, and maybe a wider circle, and I wanted to elaborate on that a bit. We all hear that modern and contemporary art is what—where the action is, and that the Old Masters are losing ground, and that may be true in the financial area, and in the auction houses and the commercial dealers. People are taking an easier route other than going into the Old Masters area. Old Masters require language, study, travel. Not so much money—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] [00:02:04]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —compared to the modern, but time, and a lot of thinking and study. And it's harder in modern society to carve out that time, or there's too much competition for it. So, the question that everybody has been wrestling with over the last 10 years is, what's the role of the Old Masters in the future? Are they going to—are Old Masters going to be an art area that is less interesting to the public, or less interesting to collectors and museums because there's more money and activity and availability in modern and contemporary?

And I've thought about that a lot; it's an area I find important. And for a while, people were pretty pessimistic, and some of them are still talking in a pessimistic way, but I see more light out there for Old Masters then a lot of people realize, or are talking about. And maybe it's because of my connection with Harvard and Holland and the scholarly interest in Old Master drawings and Old Master paintings. Now, in the last interview we got into the question of the great gift that Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo and Susan and Matt Weatherbie made to the MFA of, at that time, something in the vicinity of 113 Dutch 17th-century paintings and, really, in many cases, fine examples. [00:04:00] I want to say that's—that gift—I want to give full credit to it. It's an extraordinary gift, and it's going to have a big impact, certainly in this country and, I think, elsewhere. The original context for the setting-up of an—the original idea for the setting-up of the Netherlands Institute and bringing in the van Otterloos and the Weatherbies, I think, was mine and Peter Sutton.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And perhaps I was a little less appreciative of having worked on this project for 10 years, and then being kind of out of the loop when the van Otterloos and Weatherbies, two very good friends and sometimes legal clients of mine, had discussions with Matthew Teitelbaum at the MFA and made their basic terms relating just to paintings, and perhaps some furniture that the van Otterloos have, without keeping me in the loop while the discussions were going on. And I think the reason they were discussing the structure with Matthew Teitelbaum without my being, I think, included—I think it was a mistake not to include me in those discussions—was that I had been in favor of an individual nonprofit charitable foundation—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh. [00:06:13]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —to hold the art and to perpetuate the interest and the activities of the foundation in educating and exhibiting and activities related to the Dutch art. Every collector worries about his collection of art. Where's it going to end up? Well, some choose to sell, and money comes in and then gets dispersed to families, and that's the end of that, and the market absorbs it, and it goes in all directions. The idea of a central organization, which would not do that, and would be having exhibitions and cooperating with museums, seemed to me to be the right approach to prevent the disbursement of collections that were almost impossible to put together again, and to prevent the neglect. Matthew Teitelbaum came to the MFA, and he's charming and he's very good with collectors and very good with people who are interested in museums; collectors, to an extent. Matter of fact is, he's done very well. But he made it clear, I guess, in early discussions with the van Otterloos and Weatherbies that his idea of a model is that the museum has to be the owner and the central entity with the —of the paintings and works of art, and other things that might be part of a foundation, that an individual foundation would be duplicating a lot of what a museum does, will be expensive, and will perhaps peter out, as many of them have. [00:08:05]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And Rose-Marie and Eijk and Susan and Matt shifted gear and went with the idea of the museum being the recipient and the trust and hopes for the museum would be something that they could perhaps get some insurance against by the nature of the agreement and by supplying a lot of money.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Now, the foundation is supposed to be funded, and has been funded initially—not the foundation, the Center, with $10 million gifts from both the Weatherbies and the van Otterloos.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I think they both expect to give an additional amount in the area of $10 million each, and the MFA would probably supply either direct or indirect support for matching amounts of $10 million, and perhaps a second $10 million. This would provide, and if they've done the agreement properly—mind you, I've—they've never shared that agreement with me—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Which is somewhat odd.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and I don't know all the terms. I know some of them, and I know that they provide that they want at least 85 percent of the paintings on exhibition at all times. [00:10:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That's high.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Now—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That means 80-plus—

GEORGE ABRAMS: That's—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —images—

GEORGE ABRAMS: That's high.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —and paintings.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And if you had 85 paintings from that group on exhibition—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: At the MFA, or altogether? It could be somewhere else, or—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, that's where the—they're beginning to modify that. It doesn't have to be in—at the MFA —

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and they—it really is a lending organization. The Center wants to be doing exhibitions; it wants to be sending paintings out to museums; it wants to develop widespread use of the collection in the New England area and wider area, and major exhibitions that go to museums around the world. Needless to say, when you start looking at the Center in that light, people with experience realize that it's not going to be an easy road. The technical aspects of the registrar's office and the shipping and the insurance and the couriers and all of the aspects of the Center's art, which the collectors expect to be exhibited that much and on the road, is going to entail a number of people and a number of specialists, and the head of that is going to have to oversee it, much as the head or director of the museum would be overseeing his—his or her holdings, museum holdings, and performing all the functions of exhibitions in the area of the museum or in loans or in conservation or in any number of other areas—and requests for photographs—and it's hard to fully realize how difficult that's going to be, but I've seen it everywhere. Now, there is a model out there which I regard as an extraordinarily good model —there are two, in fact—and I think— [00:12:02]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The [Robert] Lehman collection, maybe?

GEORGE ABRAMS: I think I really am pushing the MFA and Matthew and the Weatherbies and van Otterloos to look very hard to Tom Kaplan's model—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I was thinking of that, too.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —with the Leiden collection.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Now, Tom Kaplan has been a great collector. He arguably has a more interesting and better collection in a number of areas than any private person in the world. He holds 15 Rembrandts, of which three or four may be disputed, but 10 or more are not.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He holds a Vermeer which is generally accepted, with a few dissenters; an interesting painting. He holds wonderful Gerrit Dou paintings in depth, wonderful Leiden School paintings in depth. Delft paintings. He delves deeply into artists, whereas the Weatherbies are really in mid-stage collecting. They have a limited number of paintings. Some of their earlier acquisitions are lesser than the later works they've been acquiring. You're looking at 30 paintings and the van Otterloos, you're looking at 90 and both are adding at the upper level. Occasionally in the middle level, but mostly in the upper level. The— [00:14:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: But isn't the Leiden collection more like the independent nonprofit kind of model?

GEORGE ABRAMS: That's my model—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, which is your model.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Right.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I was thinking—but for—in terms of, you know, a center within a museum, I'm thinking the Lehman, although I might not have that correct.

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, it's not a center in a museum.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's an entity in its own. In what form it will ultimately be, or whether it could provide that, ultimately, the collection would go to specific museums, that's up to Tom Kaplan to work out. But what the Leiden Center has done is that they've set up a series of exhibitions, and Tom Kaplan freely says, "The reason I do this is to show places that don't normally see good Dutch art, great Dutch art, and to let Dutch art go there in major exhibitions," and expose new publics—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. [00:16:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —to what he considers one of the great periods in art history. Everyone considers that. So, over the last three years, he's been perfecting his model. He's got my close friend, often client, Johnny van Haeften from England, who's been helping him; he's got Arthur Wheelock, who's just retired from the National Gallery, working for him fulltime. He's got any number of scholars who contribute and work and develop information, and he set up a very elaborate website with his paintings all reproduced, and their history, and availability to scholars.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, it's fabulous. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's extraordinary, and he's put a lot of his own money into it. Now, he is not poor.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Silver mines.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He's got mineral interests; he worked for Soros, and he's—his financial well-being is quite solid.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He's got other interests, which makes him a little more interesting than some of the people who concentrate on making money. He's interested in saving wild cats—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and he's got a foundation that does that, and he's got a lot of support in England, where he went to college.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: He's supported history museums there of the Second World War. He gave some extraordinary old airplanes, one, and sold another for the benefit of the history museum. But his objective is to have these exhibitions—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. [00:18:02]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —around the world, and he doesn't need the paintings to—in his presence. He really gets very good reproductions, puts them in nice frames, and leaves them around. They remind him of the paintings, but the paintings are off somewhere else. So, in the last couple of years, he's gotten his program of exhibitions going full-tilt, so the collection has been exhibited—I'm just doing this off the top of my head—in Shanghai—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] St. Petersburg.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —another mainland China city. It's gone to the Louvre, where a number of them—perhaps 30 of his paintings—were exhibited; not very well by the Louvre. It was in a hard-to-get-to place, and they didn't—for whatever reason, they didn't give it the space or credit or appreciation they might have. But then it's gone on to the Pushkin Museum in Moscow; it's now at St Petersburg in the museum there. It's—it got tremendous acclaim, and the paintings were well-received and visited. It opens in Abu Dhabi in—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, that's the next one.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —a few weeks. And I, incidentally, made a call, which I do about once or twice a—well, once a week to my friend Johnny van Haeften; I always ask him when I reach him, “Where are you?” The last time I called I said, “Where are you?” and he told me, “Abu Dhabi.”

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I said, “Well, I'll call you tomorrow.” He said, “I'll be in Paris.”

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, my goodness. [00:19:55]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, keeping up. But he's doing terrific things in lining these exhibitions up, and the exhibitions are a great success. That's private, and that's an individual with a drive who's doing what the Weatherbies and van Otterloos somewhat want to do, in a different level and different location and emphasis on the United States, but not necessarily. They want to do that in the similar way. Tom Kaplan's bearing all those costs. He's got several curators. He hires great authorities; they advise him; they put out catalogs; they do PR. I don't know how many people actually work on these projects, but there's got to be 10, 20, 30, maybe more. And they're going place to place and planning and setting up new exhibitions. He also has support particularly for five museums. He has personal relationships in England. He was with Christopher Brown at the National Museum, but he has loans there. He has loans in Boston; the MFA has had a lot of loans. He has loans at the Getty. He—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So, you think the Weatherbies and the van Otterloos should do something more along his lines, but they're not. So, what can they do within the MFA? I mean, how will the Center—will the Center—won't it make use of the curators and the registrars, et cetera, that already exist at the MFA, or do they want to have a separate, you know, infrastructure for the—

GEORGE ABRAMS: They're working all that out right now, and they've got—they're not opening the Center till 2020, and they've brought in all sorts of people to advise them. [00:22:02]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they had one conference where there were 50 of the experts in the field; I wasn't invited.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: They had another conference where they tried to get a similar number, maybe somewhat smaller, and a number of those people had conflicts. Some were on the telephone—Arthur Wheelock was on the telephone; Otto Naumann—but some were there. They got a temporary person who was doing the technical details and helping—temporary director, not really directing—and they started a search. And the search is going to be a little bit difficult because they haven't defined exactly—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: What that director is supposed to do.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —what they want, and that may change as they start to get closer to operating—on when they're operating. I don't know what the final agreement is going to be. I know what we had proposed for the—

before they got into the discussions with Matthew at the MFA for some of the terms they wanted. I—and they wanted me to join as a third person, and to put my drawings and paintings—incidentally, I've got about 60 paintings, of which 25 to 30 are of the van Otterloo/Weatherbie—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Quality?

GEORGE ABRAMS: —quality, and some of them are unique that would make a big difference in the exhibition that they would send around—exhibitions. For instance, I've got a great Willem van de Velde pen painting—[00:24:03]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —that's over six feet by four feet, and with many figures and ships. And they don't have, and they can't find, anything close to that. And I have a particularly good Ruisdael, and a good Salomon van Ruysdael.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've got a number of Salomon van Ruysdaels, besides van de Veldes, and many very good van Goyens; Cornelis Vroom. They can't get that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Don't have anything like it. I have Johannes Goedaert. They didn't—wouldn't know who Johannes Goedaert was. That's G-O-E-D-A-E-R-T. Some people spell it with—G-O-E-D-A-R-T. But he's an exceptionally important scientist and artist of the Netherlands, and which there's only seven paintings we know, and about eight drawings, and I have one of the landscape paintings by him, and two of the eight drawings. In Holland he's exceptionally well known. He wrote books on metamorphosis, pioneering books, and did some extraordinary work in scientific areas with [Antonie van] Leeuwenhoek and others.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: So—but that's not going to happen, though, that your paintings would go to the MFA or to the Center, right? That—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Hasn't been worked out yet.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —okay. And I think you alluded, like, that might happen. Your drawings will go to Harvard— [00:26:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The drawings are going to Harvard, or a few will go to my two daughters and my grandson.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You're doing exciting things at Harvard, though, with the drawings and—

GEORGE ABRAMS: We've had—Harvard is already doing things that the Center is projecting—the MFA—and, along the lines that the MFA would like to do.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: We have scholars coming regularly to Harvard to work with students and to lecture and to bring in professors. For instance, a week ago, Harvard brought in all the local Dutch professors. There was BU, Wellesley, Emmanuel College—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Dutch painting professors?

GEORGE ABRAMS: —drawings, and there were watercolors.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they brought Alison Kettering, who was a longtime scholar and she did a lecture and presentation.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Alison?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah, Alison Kettering. And she did a lecture and showed thirty of my drawings and five—no, three of Harvard's drawings, which show—which illuminated the period. And students came there; there were graduate students; there were some fellows. Eijk and Rose-Marie van Otterloo were there.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [00:27:56]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it was a fascinating few hours, which I think a lot of people learned quite a bit that they didn't know before.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: In some ways, I feel like it—I mean, it's sort of a good outcome in that, you know, Harvard has just the history of drawings and drawing scholarships going back, as we talked before, to, you know, the '20s and even before, with Paul Sachs.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And MFA doesn't, you know. So, having this—and drawings can't really be part of this, you know, exhibition mania—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Eighty-five percent up in the—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: At all.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —at all times, because you wouldn't want that.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah. So, in a way, I mean, Harvard knows how to take care of drawings; they have this fabulous new study center to go look at, to use with students. I mean, it's all—you're all set up and ready to go, whereas—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Harvard also has the undergraduate and graduate student body.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, so—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Which the MFA doesn't have and it hopes to attract.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But Harvard always produced a large number of art scholars in art and curators for museums and directors.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: At one point, Harvard had graduates from its program directing 32 museums in the United States because it was such a good, specialized program that dominated the field.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: That's a big factor in why I ultimately told the MFA and the Weatherbies and the van Otterloos that I would not go to the Center—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, I don't think—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —at the MFA—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —it would have been a good solution, actually.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —that I would try to set it up with the help of Martha Tedeschi, who's the director there—try to set it up at Harvard, but look to it to be fully cooperative. [00:30:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: That's the ideal, because then, when necessary and possible, you'll be able to send drawings to these shows. You know, sort of be the Boston whatever. I mean, you could contribute to the shows. There could be collaboration between the MFA and Harvard, but in a way, Harvard is better set up for drawings, I feel like. You want them to be special.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, and I was fortunate in one respect.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: My—I have a close friend from my class who was trustee of a major foundation. He was actually—I think he set it up for a man by the name of [Stanley H.] Durwood.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I talked with him about what I was doing, and he has given Harvard, in the last two to three years, $5 million in support of my idea of a Dutch drawing center at Harvard. And we now have from that,

in perpetuity funded, a Fogg fellow to work on Dutch art, Dutch drawings in the Fogg's collection, and mine in particular.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: We have a fund in perpetuity to take students to different parts of the world in connection with their drawing studies. We have a fund for catalogs and publications, lectures, seminars, and bringing people to teach the students. We have good scholars coming regularly to Harvard and students are getting really good exposure to these people.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I think—I mean, you're already up and running, and they're still trying to—[laughs]—to figure out what to do.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we're learning, and we're going to get better.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, this is—you know, and they once asked Robert Oppenheimer a question, and somebody got up at a lecture he was giving and said, “Is it true that you wrote your PhD thesis on a train ride from New York to Boston?” [00:32:18]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And he said, “You know, that's true,” and the questioner said, “How in the world did you do that?” and he said, “Well, you know, it's simple. I'd thought about it.”

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I've thought about this for a long time, and so I've got ideas that I work with and then some that I've rejected and moved in different directions, so I know where I want to go. I also believe that drawing—Old Master drawing field and the Dutch drawing field is totally different than the Dutch painting field.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I think I may have said that earlier in the interviews, but just in summary, we have different scholars, different collectors.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: They don't overlap very much.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No, they really don't.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And people who love drawings really love drawings in a way that you may not love paintings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No. It's really true.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It's a different group. A lot of people who—they don't like drawings; they don't—they just don't understand them. They think maybe they're prints, or maybe—they don't get them. But if you get them, you really get them.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And the paintings are sort of annoying. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, now you're saying some of the things I would say, but might not dare do. But—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] I'm allowed to say.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I'm—in my less serious days, I've compared drawings to—and the love of drawings—to martinis.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] [00:33:56]

GEORGE ABRAMS: When you first taste a martini, it's not so good, maybe, but there are some people who get very used to it and love martinis more than anything.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But drawings have a special appeal, and we've talked about how it's much closer to the artist in some of our views, and to the artist's thinking and creative process, and paintings are more planned. You have to mix the paint; you've got to get the right canvas; you've got to outline it. It's a different—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, it's a public presentation, as opposed to—a drawing could be a public presentation, but it's also a very—it's a work; it's a study; it's very private.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's a personal expression of things that are on your mind and making your hand move.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, understanding that, I thought Harvard, with its history, and the difference between paintings as the van Otterloos and Weatherbies had, and drawings which I had, that it would be better to keep them at Harvard. And there is also the issue that paintings sometimes marginalized drawings, or overwhelm drawings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: The general public may like the color and they like going from scene to scene, but that doesn't work so much with drawings, and drawings require study and close examination and maybe holding them in your hand so you can feel the vibrations. And if you're really lucky, when you hold things, beautiful drawings, in your hand, you can feel pretty close to the artist who did it, whereas the paintings were there for people to view from a distance. [00:36:06]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I was in Edinburgh last week, and I was with a group called the Curators of Dutch Art which I've sponsored and helped—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: CODART. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —in part—CODART, and it's now—it's 20 years, and 20-year anniversary, and so it's a very interesting organization, and it's a powerful organization now. It's got over 700 members from—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Seven hundred?

GEORGE ABRAMS: —all over the world, and I never knew there were that many curators of Dutch art. Some of them may be associates. But in any event, the—they just had an exhibition of Rembrandts in England, and Rembrandt's involvement or non-involvement in England over his lifetime, and the director, or the curator of Northern Art at the National Gallery in Scotland in Edinburgh—Tico Seifert took out an almost-unknown Hendrick Goltzius drawing. It isn't in the great scholar's book, Reznicek book, and it isn't in his supplement, because it wasn't in a mainstream location.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But Tico has started to exhibit it and let the people know about it. It's one of the greatest drawings I've ever seen. It's large; it's a portrait of an ugly old man with a flop hat that's about three feet by three feet in size. [00:38:02]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it is so elaborate and intricate and interesting, and you see that, and you get a whole new vision of Goltzius.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: He's just a brilliant artist.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And you realize how great he can be, which he—a lot of people don't realize that. Now, I, yesterday, formally signed the documents giving Harvard my—one of my five best drawings, I think, or 10. My beautiful Rembrandt of the four heads of an old man.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Sotheby's did an appraisal, which I won't use in my tax return because I don't have any use for it. I don't have the type of income to support it. I have tax potential deductions expiring every year that go to waste, and there's nothing I can do about it, but that's the way life is.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But Sotheby's appraised that drawing at so high a figure that I was really shook up at what I was doing—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —because I don't relate art to money, and that's what allows me to give it away. And I don't think of art as having anything to do with money; it's art. Now, you can't help but have to face up to the fact that money is involved, and when you try to buy things, and you have to borrow from the bank in order to pay, and you're in debt, and you've got things that you want to buy, you know that money is somewhat of a factor there. But I don't equate it until, suddenly, yesterday, when I was signing those documents, and I was looking at what we had for the Sotheby's appraisal, I was thinking, "This could buy a professorship, a chief curator, a large fund for other—this could really do a lot when it came to money, and maybe I should rethink what I'm doing." [00:40:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I struggled with that thought, because it was really difficult for me to give up my—in my head, the ownership. But then I thought art isn't money until you convert it to money, and when you convert it to money, you lose something. Somebody else gets it. And if you give it to Harvard, where there's an interest and a history in Old Master drawings, you're going to give it for a long period of students and faculty and others—visitors; scholars, they're going to have it, and it's going to be part of them. And the money, while it's so tempting, is really not, in the long run, important.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, it's very generous of you.

GEORGE ABRAMS: The—what?

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It's very generous of you.

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, I don't even think that way. Maybe it's selfish of me. I don't want someone else to own it other than a museum. I—you know, some people say it's generous, and it's nice of them to say that, but you know, you think of what—you're only here for a short while, and then there are people after you. There's a poem that David McCord, a great Harvard alum, wrote, and I may have mentioned it earlier, but it really—I'll summarize it. He said something like—it's longer—"'Is that you, John Harvard?' I said as I passed his statue. 'Yes, 'tis I,' he said, 'and after you're gone.'" [00:42:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that's true, you know.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh, yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: You're going to be gone. People will forget you, and you're not, in the long run, important, except maybe if you can leave something behind.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But even then, they'll forget you and focus on the—what you left behind. And that drawing belongs in the public, and it belongs at an institution like Harvard—the Rembrandt—because there will be students looking at that drawing 50 and 60 years from now and being inspired by it. And that goes to the point I started making in the original of this section, the talk: the Old Master field is not dead. We're fighting back, and we're fighting back in ways that are effective. People don't notice it, but you start to realize that there are lots of young people out there who aren't willing to go to the modern art or contemporary art reason. Most will be tempted because of the interest in the activity, the auctions, the dealers, the money involved, the opportunities to make money—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right. [00:44:01]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and to be the center. But there is a whole segment out there of people—students; young curators—who love old things, Old Master drawings, and come to hold them in their hands. And the magic of Old Master drawings and other works of art will continue for those people, and you've got to foster them. Now, we had a Fogg fellow—the first one we used on those funds that my classmate, Charles Egan, worked out—who worked with us for a year and a half, and she was very good. She came from the Courtauld originally, and she learned a lot, and we all worked with her. I worked with her; Susan Anderson; Bill Robinson when he was at the Fogg; and Edouard Kopp. And she did a small exhibition of some of my drawings from 1590 to 1630, which is an

area I'm specifically interested in, and then, suddenly, the curator of the Northern drawings job came open at the Morgan Library, because the person who'd taken that had been tapped by the Rijksmuseum to take a curator's job there.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Ilona.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they did a search, and who did they come up with as the best person for that job? Our fellow who's now in New York and working away and will do very well for them.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: She's learned a lot, and she's very good. We haven't—the next fellow is in, and I met her a couple of weeks ago.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Joanna Sheers [Seidenstein]?

GEORGE ABRAMS: And she's got terrific potential, too. [00:46:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, she's great.

GEORGE ABRAMS: She is really great, and she tells me she's having the best time of her life right now.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, great. You know, she was at the Frick—

GEORGE ABRAMS: She was at the—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —for many, many years, yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: She was at the Frick; she was at the Met.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I think we're going to have her, and a year and a half from now, we're going to have her poised to be another major curator in the years to come.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, she's great. She should really—yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, there's an example of two young people, but there's about 20 more over at Harvard we're working on, and two graduate students entered Harvard for the first time this year, and I met with them a week ago, and they came to Harvard as graduate students specifically because of the drawing gift I gave to Harvard and the opportunity to work with the collection and the drawings, and they're very excited. And in that group, we had a symposium, a day study of watercolors and the use of wash and color in the Netherlands from the 16th and 17th century, and in that group were three other young people who had worked with me as curators, and with my collection in the past. And they're in the field now, too and they're spreading out—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —so that—we're not unique. The Rijksmuseum is doing the same thing. And Jane Turner over there has interns, and I met one in Edinburgh when I was there last week who is interning with Jane Turner, and she's going to be really good, I think. She knows a lot, and we talked a lot about some of the art. She's very knowledgeable. So, what I see out there is contrary to what you hear that young people aren't interested. I see really interested young people who are going to continue this history and tradition. We have to do everything to nurture them. [00:48:02]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, I think the gift, and having it at Harvard, is so great, because you can nurture them. You're—you know, it's like it's—having the university with a collection together is so ideal. I mean, that was always what was so great about Harvard, and in this time when things might be going the other way, to have, you know, energy and more collections at Harvard in a university—it's just fabulous. You're doing a lot for this field.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, it was a real fight, because in the '80s and '90s, with Michael Fried and a few of the other scholars, who were not into objects, holding sway, connoisseurship was really looked down on, to a certain extent.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Definitely.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But it's come back at Harvard. People haven't noticed it, but the fine arts faculty comes to

the museum consistently to work with objects and students in the new study centers.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they use continuously—I go over there some days, and it's full of students and faculty looking at things, and teaching sessions going on.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, the—Harvard has turned around its approach back to where it belongs, and its director Martha Tedeschi, who used to be at the Chicago Art Institute—fully believes in the program and is really trying to develop an overall drawing center, not just Dutch. We hope to have Italian support; we've got major people. We're trying to see if we can put that together. [00:50:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: We already have French support, and we're—I think I'm—my friend, Mr. Egan, wants me to talk to him sometime in the week of November 8th, and we can perhaps do a little more to set something up.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wait, who's Mr. Egan? Sorry.

GEORGE ABRAMS: He is the benefactor who has given the major amount of money—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, Charles Egan?

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we've got some more opportunities to perhaps build up another part of the program. So, Harvard is fully vested. The museum and others are fully vested in going forward with this idea of being a center. Well, we are just losing our curator, the Maida and George Abrams curator, Edouard Kopp, who's on his way to Houston. His wife was a modern contemporary art curator at Yale, and she couldn't find the right position in the Boston area, but she will in Houston. And he was offered the de Menil center of drawings [Menil Drawing Institute]. That would be 19th, 20th, and modern.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, so these modern—yeah. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah. He—they just had a child, and he didn't want to continue to be separated, with her living in New Haven and him in Cambridge.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, he reluctantly—and he was really good at it—he reluctantly took the de Menil job. Well, before we could breathe, a candidates list sprang up. [00:52:01]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's now been advertised, but before it was advertised, we had 12 names of people who would be interested. And you'd be surprised who they'd be—who they are. And they're great names. I mean, they're—I can see eight or nine of them fitting right in.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wow.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Really, really good people. And some of them would be dynamos.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: We don't have enough jobs. We may expand so that there will be two people selected with the drawing center in mind. But there are people out there who could do wonders for museums and other things. There just aren't the positions, and that's the next area. I'm thinking about how to create more positions for these young people to work in and be paid at least—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: The Institute—[laughs]—the Institute of Fine Arts has no positions.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It—the Institute is a non-functioning part of the art scene now, because it doesn't have people working on this program.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No, it doesn't. No, I know.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I don't know how you deal with that. Now, there are centers, though—the Morgan Library is the other center in the United States, and they got funded through Gene Thaw. They've got great art. They can bring students in; they're not part of a university, but they can bring students in as—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: They have a fellowship program, yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and they're setting up fellowship programs.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And the National Gallery in Washington is another location where that could be done. Also, the Rijksmuseum is very active. [00:54:00]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Taco Dibbits is really pushing an educational program, and he's a dynamo. He knows what he wants. He and I spent a lot of time talking about the issue of scholarships and fellows, and what I thought Eijk and Rose-Marie and Matt and Susan were aiming for when we were thinking of an independent entity. And I talked about the fellowships, and the next thing I knew, he went out and got one from one of his patrons.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And then he went out to get another. So, he's got some good things going. So, I said—I'm a little more optimistic about what the future holds, and I at least know what we're going to try to do at Harvard.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I know what I'd like to see done at the MFA, and it's up in the air right now. As I say, it's a different area of scholarship and collectors when you're—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: It really is, yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —working with paintings, and it's a different approach.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But they want the students; they want fellows; they want to bring professors in for lectures, and they want a very active program of that nature.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: But as I say, I think Harvard is so ideal for you, because you already have the infrastructure. [Laughs.] So—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, and not only that; so does the Rijksmuseum.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And so does a number of other places. Now, the issue with the collection at the Netherlands Center at the MFA is that no matter what happens, that holdings of the Center will never be as strong as the holdings of the National Gallery in London or the Rijksmuseum or the Louvre or St. Petersburg or some of the other museums in Germany. Munich—that Museum Island in Berlin, and elsewhere. [00:56:22]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's going to contain what were top-of-the-market paintings over a 15-year period, maybe a 20.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, the MFA has been collecting also, but—yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: The MFA has an equal number of paintings, some of them masterpieces.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It's got its own Rembrandts.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: In Edinburgh, the two great pictures of the Reverend Elias and his wife were the dominant pictures in that exhibition—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I bet, wherever they go.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and they're the same size, same year, as the two great paintings that the Louvre and the Rijksmuseum bought from the Rothschilds for 180 million euro.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Perry Rathbone bought that just after the war, or sometime in that period—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —for $500,000.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Wow. The pair?

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they're—it's a pair. Husband and wife, like the Louvre one and the Rijksmuseum one, but the Louvre and the Rijksmuseum one has more swagger, perhaps, and the reverend and his wife is fairly reverent.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah, topic—it's topical.

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: But it's—so they labor with one issue, which is the Rijksmuseum wants to put on—well, the Rijksmuseum every day has a stronger exhibition than the ones they can send around. [00:58:05]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: That's true of the National Gallery in London, and it's true of St. Petersburg.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: But for this country, it creates—it could create a lot of activities, a lot of smaller exhibitions, and scholars will come in. I'm a little less convinced that scholarship in the Old Master paintings has anywhere near the depth of opportunities that scholarship in drawings have. But we'll see.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah. I mean, the van Otterloo collection—I—it's an interesting collection, in that it's a little different, right? Than some of—it's not, like, the greatest hits kind of collection. It's interesting examples of the various Dutch artists. It's sort of, things—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, yeah—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —you didn't necessarily think of, or—I mean, they're beautiful paintings in and of their own right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Okay, let me give—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.] Let me throw that out there.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —let me give a little counterargument.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: The van Otterloos, when they started collecting, sat down with Simon Levie, who was the director of the Rijksmuseum, who became their adviser. And they asked Simon to prepare something for them about collecting, and he prepared a document where he listed 65 painters who he thought should be in a representative collection of Dutch paintings.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And they then systematically went out to buy good examples of every one of those painters.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, they did. [Laughs.] [00:59:56]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And that was really almost a great hits, available-in-the-market type exhibition, or collection.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, the—there is not the depth of Thomas Kaplan, and Dou and Frans van Mieris, and Lievens, and Rembrandt, and some of the other artists, but there's a representative example—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right, right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —of important artists.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Which has its own benefits for a teaching collection.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yes. And every collection is different; every collection gives opportunities for scholarship and activities. So, I have high hopes. They're in a search now for the director and I met with a director—I met with the head of the search, the woman who was doing it, three days ago.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I had suggested three names with—to Matthew Teitelbaum, and he immediately sent me back an email and said, “Can you meet with so-and-so?” And I did, and I juggled my schedule, and I met with her. I gave her six names of people who I thought were potential—I told her the two I felt were the strongest, and I talked to a couple of people who might have been good but would not move from major positions. But I gave them my idea of who I thought would be the strongest. One of them may be out of the picture very quickly, because he has a chance at the National Gallery job replacing Arthur Wheelock, but he may not be. We'll see. But one of them is a prime candidate, and they'd be really good. and they're the type of people they want, I think. [01:01:59]

They're looking for a scholar in the director's position who can help with the programs of scholarship and figure out a scholarly approach to the Center. But they need somebody who's also an administrator, because the administration of that is going to be really tough.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: But maybe they can have a double position.

GEORGE ABRAMS: They need more than one person, and they need several other administrators, and they need somebody who can figure out the exhibition schedule that would make sense and go out and work on it. And how they coordinate that with the MFA's activities—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No, that's the tricky thing.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —is something that they have to work out.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Luckily, they're not asking my advice.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I think you're well—[laughs]—

GEORGE ABRAMS: [Laughs.] And so—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —out of it.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —I've got enough things to think about.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I am working closely at Harvard. I'm trying to develop those programs.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, I—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I think you have enough on your plate already. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I actually have decided I've got to really cut back, because it's a little crazy, my schedule.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And when—I thought—there I was in Edinburgh for five, six, seven days, running around by myself, walking everywhere—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, it's a hilly city.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and climbing—they don't have elevators—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —in museums over in—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And all their streets crisscross under and over, and—

GEORGE ABRAMS: And so, I was climbing up six and seven flights of stairs.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Oh, my goodness.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It was a little bit heavy, and staying in the hotels that the young curators stay in isn't too comfortable.

[They laugh.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: We stayed in a nice hotel. We were all somewhat in the same place, but my room didn't have any chairs.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No? Tiny room. [00:02:00]

GEORGE ABRAMS: And it didn't have a telephone.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: What? Oh, my goodness.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah. So, that's the life a curator leads.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah. Not a great financial decision to become a curator, but—[laughs]—

GEORGE ABRAMS: So, I really want to say that the field is full of a lot of wonderful people, collectors, curators, directors. There are only a few who I've found difficult, and that goes back 60-plus years.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Amazing.

GEORGE ABRAMS: And I was fortunate to know most of the great scholars and people in the field, from Frits Lugt to Seymour Slive to Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann. They're all people who were extraordinary and have built the field up, and in Boston we were particularly fortunate because of Harvard and Paul Sachs and others who built the groundwork from 1940, when Otto Benesch came over to Harvard during the war to work on his Rembrandt books, and when Jacob Rosenberg left Berlin and came to Harvard, and when Begemann came over to Harvard for a period of time, and that took place, and then Frank Robinson and Bill Robinson and Konrad Oberhuber—we were fortunate to build the groundwork for great activities in collecting. And that occurred over that long period of time, but it may well have come to fruition with the gift to the MFA and my gift to Harvard to show the opportunity and to create it for some wonderful work and a central area for the scholarship and work in Dutch 17th-century art, and perhaps 18th- and 19th- and other type activities which I'm interested in. We can build on that, and I think it's going to be special. [00:04:18]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, I think that's a great ending. What do you think? Are there little last—[laughs]—nuggets that you want to add? But I think you summed it up in a very positive way.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I'm trying to be positive and say how much many, many people contributed. I'd hate that to be lost, that fact. I'd hate the history of how this was built up from the '30s, '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s in Boston to be lost by the PR that goes with the van Otterloos and Weatherbies' gift and the MFA's great public relations office and efforts—and necessary efforts as a public museum. The history could be lost in large measure. It didn't start in the late 1980s with the initial collecting of the van Otterloos or the Weatherbies. It started—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: No, I—

GEORGE ABRAMS: —long before, but the temptation—various factors feed into it—is to try and make that the starting point, and it's not. [00:05:58]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Well, I think in the—you know, in the long run, the history would—you know, you can't really write the history in the long run without Harvard's role all throughout the 20th century. And if you do, it's going to be a short-lived time period where, you know, they have—as you say, it's—the museum's PR department has to sort of present it this way to make it sound that way. But I think in the long run, the history will come out, and I think your interview has done a lot. We went all through the time periods—

GEORGE ABRAMS: Yeah.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: —and—

GEORGE ABRAMS: My tough question is whether I want the MFA to have some of the works that I've got that would fit into their operation if they intend to expand it, and whether—and where some of my special paintings would go.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: I wish Harvard had more space in its museum, and I'm sorry that it can't do the kind of major exhibition for the public that the MFA can.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: Jeffrey Horvitz, who's been a major French collector and should be giving many of his drawings to Harvard, talks about how many of the general public get to see the things, and exhibiting his drawings with more eyeballs to see it. I hate the word eyeballs to see it.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah.

GEORGE ABRAMS: It implies people are just looking. I want them to do more than that. I want them to think—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Right.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —and I want them to be involved emotionally and otherwise. But that is a problem for Harvard, but maybe the answer is, well, to have interested people and scholars from everywhere, and students—undergraduate and graduate students to see, is really one of the prime objectives, and can offset the fact that the general public is not able to see a great exhibition in large numbers unless they send it to different museums around the world. [00:07:59]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: And, you know, if you think about the fact that you're training the future scholars in the field, they'll go work in museums that have these spaces where—and they will know about Harvard's collection, and they can bring it in. So—

GEORGE ABRAMS: And we've got good plans for the future—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: —long after, as David McCord said, you're gone. [Laughs.]

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Yeah. [Laughs.] Well, bravo. I think you've done amazing work.

GEORGE ABRAMS: Well, I think that should wind it up.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay.

GEORGE ABRAMS: I can—I'll keep thinking of new things to—[laughs]—

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: I'm sure you will.

GEORGE ABRAMS: —say, but forget it!

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Every year, we'll have to do another interview. [Laughs.]

GEORGE ABRAMS: No, no, we're not going to—[laughs]—we're going to stop now.

LOUISA WOOD RUBY: Okay. All right. Thank you so much, George Abrams. Signing off here.

[END OF SESSION.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]